

# Mexico Butterflies & Birds | Trip Report

## February 18 – 25, 2020 | Written by Woody Wheeler



**With Naturalist Journeys Guide Woody Wheeler & local guide Carlos Gonzalez and participants Lori, Linda, Phillip, Bonnie, Don, Steven, Dawn, Sharon, Leah, Harold, Lenore, & Barb.**

### **Tues., Feb. 18 Arrival in Mexico City**

Participants met this evening at our hotel in Mexico City, eager to start the journey. Some came directly; others came after spending a few days exploring the cultural wonders of this dynamic 22-million-person city. Following a brief orientation from Carlos and me, we all turned in for a good night's rest prior to our first day in the field. The weather forecast: sunny, warm and no chance of rain for the entire week!



*Inca Dove in downtown Mexico City*

### **Wed., Feb. 19 La Cima | Lerma Marshes**

Early in the morning, we slipped out of the 22 million metropolis of Mexico City to beat its intense traffic. It worked. In just a few hours, we found ourselves in pine forested mountains at a protected area called La Cima. In the cool of the morning, we set out in search of endemic and endangered sparrows.

As sunlight cast its light and welcome warmth upon us, we found our first sparrow perched on large rocks on a shrubby hillside: a Striped Sparrow. This turned out to be the first of many sightings to come of this distinctive sparrow that often perched conspicuously on rocks or fence posts.

Soon afterward, Carlos found our first Sierra Madre Sparrow, a Mexican endemic and endangered species. As the morning light moved overhead, we had better looks at this bird's subtle plumage that was brilliantly



illuminated. Another endemic, a Trans-volcanic Jay, flew into view just as we were headed to our field breakfast.

Rafael ("Rafa"), our driver and breakfast chef, had a nice spread ready for us that included hot coffee, a variety of cereals, fresh fruit and baked goods. It was hard to eat, though, because birds kept popping up and distracting us! Among them were Bullock's Oriole, Western Bluebird, Spotted Towhee, Cinnamon-bellied Flower piercer and Yellow-eyed Junco.



After breakfast, some opted to hike up a steep road in search of more endemics while the others remained in the bird-rich habitat below. As we climbed the hill, we heard the persistent chirping and finally saw a brilliant green flash in the vegetation: a Mexican Violet-ear Hummingbird. We watched its tiny throat bulge and its bill spread widely as it sang.

In addition, we encountered Golden-browed Warbler, Green-striped Brush Finch, Violet-crowned Hummingbird, an eye-popping colorful Elegant Euphonia and just as we re-joined the rest of the group, a Sharp-shinned Hawk chased after a flock of Pine Siskins.

Following this outstanding first stop, we headed to a traditional Mexican lunch in a nearby town.



After lunch we pulled into the massive Lerma Marshes in search of another endemic species whose relatively small range is centered here: the Black-polled Yellowthroat. As we wandered through the marshes in search of this elusive bird, we first encountered other marsh denizens such as Sora, Virginia Rail and Northern Harrier (formerly called Marsh Hawk).

Then we heard the calls and saw yellow flashes of our target bird emerging from the reeds. Everyone had good looks of the Black-polled Yellowthroat as it foraged along the water's edge in front of the reedy forest, its black facial mask minus the white eye line distinguishing it from Common Yellowthroat.



From here, we drove to our hotel, entering the state of Michoacán and its pine forested hills and mountains into the heart of this famous avocado growing region.

We dropped into a canyon at the picturesque small town of Jungapeo where our hotel was perched on a steep forested hillside above the Rio Tuxpan.

## **Thurs., Feb. 20 Birding near Jungapeo | First visit to Sierra Chincua Monarch Reserve**

While enjoying a field breakfast in the morning sun, we were serenaded by a Blue Mockingbird. It shares a similar musical variety of phrases with Northern Mockingbird and has distinctive steel blue plumage. Soon it was joined a Hooded Oriole and Vermilion Flycatcher.





After breakfast, we drove a short distance to a shallow pond surrounded by marsh land that transitioned to pine and fir forest on its mountainous flanks. This was a fine birding spot that featured shorebirds, waterfowl and raptors. Half-a-dozen Wilson's Snipe and a Spotted Sandpiper probed the mudflats. Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal were

joined by American Coot and Common Gallinule paddling through the pond. A juvenile Peregrine Falcon soared over the pond, striking fear in all of the waterfowl below. Later a Cooper's Hawk did a fly-over, eliciting fear in the smaller bird species. Lesser Goldfinch and a Canyon Towhee perched in the trees and shrubs surrounding the pond.

Following this bird-rich stop, we drove on though the colorful historic Mexican town of Angangueo to the edge of the Sierra Chincua Monarch Reserve. Here, amid towering firs and pines that were reminiscent of the western

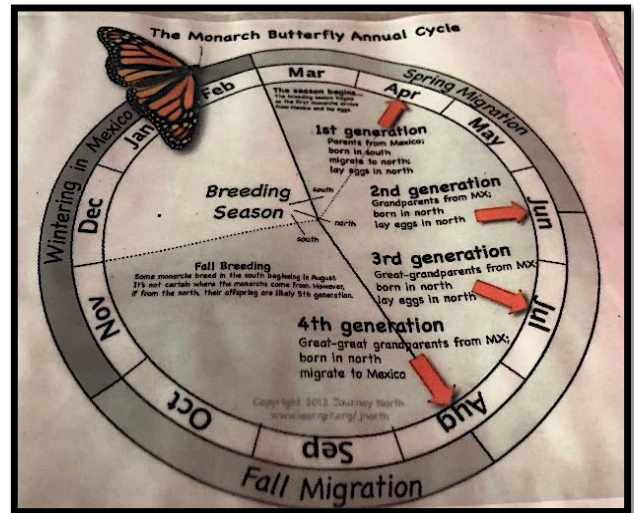




U.S., we found the startingly flashy Red Warbler flitting through the evergreen foliage. Olive, Townsend and Slate-throated Redstart Warblers added to the brilliant color palette of the birds flitting through the deep green pines and firs.

After this warbler show, it was prime time to enter the butterfly reserve, just as the day was warming up to activate the Monarchs. We mounted horses at the visitor center that were led by local men up the steep trail to the Monarch roosting area.

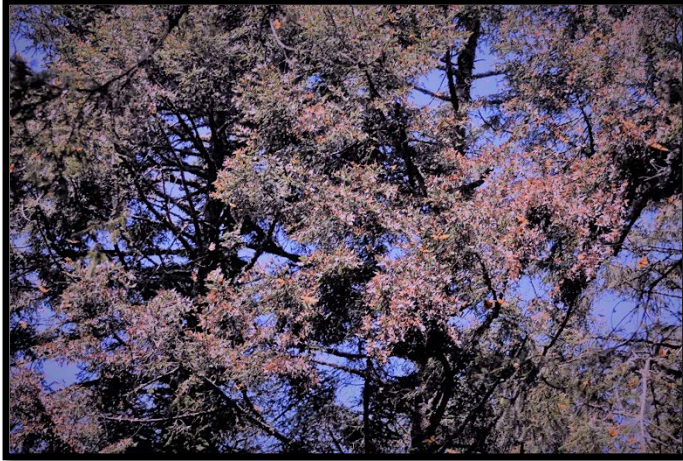
As we rode, the Monarchs began to fill the air, fluttering and soaring against the deep blue sky. Already, it was an experience like no other, and we had only just begun to enter their roosting domain.



As we rode uphill and dismounted our horses to walk the final mile, the density of Monarchs increased. They fed on the abundant wildflowers along the trail; they drank and gathered minerals from streams and wet muddy areas; they swarmed through the air like a toy snow globe filled with butterflies instead, with us inside.

After rounding a bend and dropping downhill to a viewpoint, we experienced the shocking realization that the 100-foot tall Oyamel Firs just ahead were tinted orange due to the thousands of Monarchs festooning their branches.





It was absolutely incredible, moving several in our group to tears. Everyone was awed. Some did not want to leave. We lingered and savored the experience, trying to capture its essence in photos, then hiked and rode our horses back out accompanied by Monarchs all the way.

We had a celebratory lunch in the quaint town of Angangueo. Afterward we strolled the city's cobblestone streets, viewed its impressive historic murals and some had a sumptuous piece of Tres Leches cake.



*Barb identifies male Monarch by the spots on wings*

It was time to head home after an unbelievably stimulating day. Just a mile from our hotel, some of our group opted to take an evening bird walk with Carlos down the final stretch of road. This proved to be very rewarding. We saw 20 species of birds here, including Varied and Painted Bunting, Hooded and Streak-backed Oriole.

To cap off a phenomenal day, after compiling our bird list, we had an interesting Monarch butterfly "program." I shared Monarch facts along with Barb's thorough discussion of their life cycle. It turned out that Harold knew and studied under Fred Urquhart, one of the scientists who first

determined the full Monarch migration route and identified roosting sites in Michoacán, Mexico. He read a remarkable passage from a 1976 National Geographic article about Urquhart's inspiring description of finding the roosting sites. In Urquhart's own inspired words, written in 1976:

*"I gazed in amazement at the sight. Butterflies—millions upon millions of monarch butterflies! They clung in tightly packed masses to every branch and trunk of the tall, gray-green oyamel trees. They swirled through the air like autumn leaves and carpeted the ground in their flaming myriads on this Mexican mountainside."*

It was the perfect ending to an unforgettable day.





## **Fri., Feb. 21 Birding at Agua Blanco Lodge and return to Sierra Chincua Monarch Reserve**

Soon after our outdoor breakfast, several of our group headed to Sierra Chincua Monarch Reserve for another butterfly encounter with Carlos, while the rest of the group went birding with me on the expansive lodge grounds. The Monarch group had outstanding birding too on the way to the butterfly reserve, including a number of new species not seen the previous day, like Mexican Duck and Thick-billed Kingbird. Upon returning to the Monarch refuge they were once again shocked and awed by the sheer numbers, density and beauty of the Monarchs.

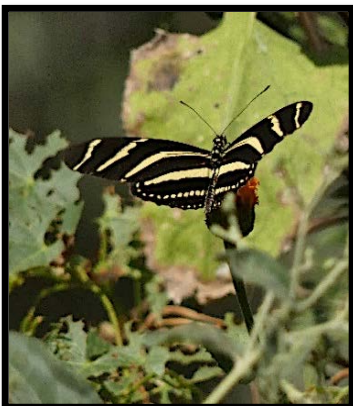


Those who remained at Agua Blanca lodge had another fine day of birding on the lush, scenic grounds overlooking the Rio Tuxpan. At the start, we admired a singing Canyon Wren perched on the hotel roof where his song resonated in the courtyard. Soon after, we had our closest looks yet of Gray Silky Flycatchers, calling as they foraged only 20 feet above us. A female Golden-cheeked Woodpecker excavated her nest hole on a palm tree trunk. Raucous Great Kiskadees repeated their names and at times clashed in the air as they made forays to palm tree fruits. One Western Tanager perched high in the canopy; his reddish crown clearly visible.



We also walked part way up the road above the hotel where we found Streak-backed and Hooded Oriole, Wilson's, Nashville and Yellow-rumped Warbler, along with numerous Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. During the course of the morning we tallied more than 20 species. In addition, we found several species of non-Monarch Butterflies, including a Zebra Longwing, White-winged Patch and a Banded Peacock.

We reunited for lunch and then enjoyed a relaxing afternoon resting or exploring the hotel grounds, which include thermal pools, a waterfall, caves, and the Rio Tuxpan. What a fabulous place!





## Sat., Feb. 22 Jungapeo to Patzcuaro via Rio Tuxpan and Lago Cuitzeo

Somewhat reluctantly, we departed from the comfortable, attractive atmosphere of Hotel Agua Blanca. But first, we crossed over the nearby Rio Tuxpan, pausing to bird along the bridge. There we had a Northern Waterthrush, Black Phoebe and both Hooded and Streak-backed Tanagers.

On the other side of the bridge, we walked on a road along a desert slope dotted with cacti. Here we soon were treated to the glorious spectacle of a Golden-cheeked Woodpecker feeding on the top of a flowering Atcho Cacti. Further along, we found the endemic Black-chested Sparrow, who sang and perched on a thin branch above us. We also saw a Blue-back Grassquit, Rivoli's Hummingbird and Orange-breasted Bunting.

We then packed up the van back at the hotel and journeyed to a wonderful buffet lunch that included custom-made quesadillas with your choice of ingredients inside. The Mexican-themed food on this trip is varied, creative and tasty!

On the way to Patzcuaro, we visited Lago de Cuitzeo. Its shallow waters, muddy shores and grassy islands provide excellent feeding, nesting and staging areas for a wide array of waterfowl, waders and shorebirds. Hundreds of White Pelicans formed large kettles against the bright blue sky.

When we walked closer to the swampy lake shore, a Loggerhead Shrike perched on a stone wall overlooking the marsh mudflats. Lines of Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal and Ring-billed Gull rested at the water's edge. A large flock of Long-billed Dowitchers probed in the mudflats with sewing machine efficiency. One Collared Plover slowly walked and fed on the near shore – a rare find! A lone Canvasback paddled by a reed island; Avocets perched and preened in the shallow waters. White-faced Ibis- flew by periodically. Both Clark's and Western Grebes plied the lake's deeper waters.

In the late afternoon, we continued on to the quaint historically preserved city of Patzcuaro. Having been here 47 years ago as a college student, I was pleased to find it much the same as it was then. The terra cotta roof tops, the two-story stone and wood buildings painted a uniform soft yellow above and burgundy below, with steep, narrow cobblestone streets leading to the most picturesque central plaza I have ever seen in any Latin American city. Our hotel had an unassuming entrance that opened up to an attractive garden with rooms above. The atmosphere was peaceful except for the joyful noise of bird song, carnival fireworks and music.

Downtown Patzcuaro lacks fast, noisy car-infested roads; people walk here. That is what we did too, to get to our lunch on the plaza. There we enjoyed a





delicious mix of fresh foods including salmon tacos and mushroom soup while being serenaded by a singer/guitarist, a common feature in restaurants in this part of Mexico.

After lunch, we strolled the plaza, shopped and took in the sights and sounds of the carnival which ranged from impromptu parades, bands and fireworks to art displays and confetti. It was a vibrant, colorful scene.

In the evening, we returned to the plaza for another excellent meal at a restaurant that featured a unique blend of Mexican and Mediterranean dishes along with a singer/guitarist who played Michoacán folk music with great passion and a haunting, soulful voice that at times broke into a falsetto. Everyone enjoyed the food and ambience immensely. At nightfall we returned to our hotel with its peaceful, landscaped grounds and turned in as the downtown festivities concluded.



## Sun., Feb. 23 Patzcuaro to Guadalajara

On another picture-perfect sunny, blue-sky day with a tinge of mountain coolness, we drove to a high viewpoint park overlooking Lake Patzcuaro. To savor the views and bird along the way, we parked a half-mile short of the summit, then walked the cobblestone road the rest of the way, a delightful and “birdy” experience in both directions.



At the highest viewpoint of the park, we took a group photo with Lake Patzcuaro behind, a lasting memory of this incredibly scenic area.

On the way up, we had excellent looks at Greater Pewee, three Acorn Woodpeckers who were brilliantly lit in the sunshine on a snag, Rufous-crowned and Golden-crowned Warbler, White-eared and Broad-billed Hummingbird. On the way down, following a lengthy search, and hearing its repetitive hoots, we located a Northern Pygmy Owl. At one point it flew to a perch on a snag occupied by several Acorn Woodpeckers who immediately harassed it until it left for a higher, quieter perch in a tall fir tree. We then were able to watch and photograph it for a long time. What a treat! In addition, we had good looks and even photos of our one and only Gray-collared Becard of the trip.





After this invigorating and productive morning walk, we drove west toward Guadalajara. Near our lunch stop in Churintzio, we walked a short distance through dry agricultural fields in search of Band-tailed Quail and Lesser Roadrunner. Although we did not find these two species, we did find several Vesper Sparrows a Vermilion Flycatcher gleaming in full sunlight and four soaring Red-tailed Hawks.



Heading west on the highway toward Guadalajara, Rafa suddenly veered to the right and pulled off safely on the shoulder for a terrific look at a perched Gray Hawk. It sat confidently in perfect light while we all had a chance to look at this magnificent bird.

From this point on, we settled in for the drive through desert hills into Guadalajara, and our eventual destination in the adjacent city of Tlaquepaque. We dropped our bags off in a pleasant hotel, cleaned up and then walked into the artsy/crafty city center. It had pedestrian-only walkways and was filled with restaurants, galleries, street art and trees -- another beautifully renovated, pedestrian-friendly downtown that was a delight to explore.



We had a final dinner Mexican-style dinner together, compiled our total bird list, then in the morning either flew to our respective homes or stayed in Mexico for additional exploring. This was an incredibly stimulating and enjoyable adventure in an enchanting country with hospitable people.

Many of us have ready made plans to return. Mexico is SO much better than advertised!



*Left: The guides: Carlos Gonzalez and Woody Wheeler*



*Right: Carlos in Tlaquepaque*