

Veracruz River of Raptors | Trip Report Sept. 29 – Oct. 10, 2021 | Written by Dave Mehlman

Guides: Kashmir Wolf, Alan Monroy-Ojeda, and Dave Mehlman with
participants: Bob, Bonnie, Don, Jay, Julia, Marion, Mary, Phyllis, and Tim



Wed., Sept. 29 Arrival at Veracruz

The group met at the Hotel Mocambo for breakfast and the optional city tour. Dave and Bob wandered around the grounds of the hotel before breakfast to do some early birding. After picking up Julia and Tim at the airport, we headed to downtown Veracruz and toured the Museo de la Ciudad. After this, we had a fine lunch at the Gran Café de la Parroquia, a Veracruz institution, then returned to the Hotel Mocambo. The early arrivers plus Bob had dinner at the Mocambo, then Kash and Dave went in our trusty tour bus driven by Victor to the airport to pick up Marion, Mary, and Phyllis and bring them to the Mocambo.

Thurs., Sept. 30 Morning Birding | Cempoala Archeological Site

Everyone was raring to go, so we met in the morning for some birding around the Hotel Mocambo before breakfast. Walking out the back of the hotel and down to the nearby beach, we got off to a great start. The usual Monk Parakeets were present (the only location where they occur on this tour), as well as a lot of the “usual suspects” such as Great Kiskadee, Social Flycatcher, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Melodious Blackbird, and Clay-colored Thrush. The beach yielded a few shorebirds, including Sanderlings, Willets, a Black-bellied Plover, and a Ruddy Turnstone. Oddly, only a few migrants were seen, including some Barn Swallows and Eastern Kingbirds.

After breakfast at the Mocambo, we loaded up into the bus and headed off to our destination for the next few days: the Hotel Bienvenido in the town of Cardel. We headed up to the roof of the hotel for some hawk watching under a sun shade that Pronatura had brought over—extremely important for sitting high on a roof in the tropical sun! We had probably our best hawk flight of the entire tour while spending a few hours on the roof (also enjoying some cold lemonade which the kitchen brought up). Broad-winged Hawks were by far the most



numerous, with between 20,000 to 30,000 birds passing over in nearly constant kettles and/or streams. Other raptors seen in much smaller numbers included Mississippi Kite; Swainson's, Zone-tailed, and Cooper's Hawks; Osprey; and the ubiquitous Black and Turkey Vultures. Adding to the fun was a small group of Wood Storks that circled over and well over 100 Anhingas in large clusters—it was hard to imagine this aquatic species turning into soaring experts, but that's the way it was!

After lunch at the Hotel Bienvenido, we reconvened and drove to the nearby Cempoala Archeological Site for a tour with Angela Estrada, an official guide for the site. Although the site was temporarily closed to the public due to Covid, we were able to tour it with the guide and we learned a great deal about the Totonac culture and their "alliance" with Hernan Cortez. After the tour ended in the late afternoon, we headed out for a short birding stop at Paso Mariano by the Rio La Antigua. One of Dave's favorite spots, Paso Mariano did not disappoint by providing excellent views of Rose-throated Becard, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, and a very cooperative Laughing Falcon. A few more migrants were found, including Yellow and Yellow-throated Warbler, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and more Barn Swallows. Most interesting was a calling Thicket Tinamou in the distance. We then headed back to the Bienvenido for dinner, the bird checklist, and a well-deserved rest.

Fri., Oct. 1 Playa Juan Angel | Hawk Watching | La Antigua

Thanks to the Hotel Bienvenido restaurant staff (some of whom apparently never sleep!), we enjoyed a great buffet breakfast in the pre-dawn darkness and then headed to the coast to Playa Juan Angel. Stopping along the road to the beach, we checked out some flowering trees in hopes of finding Mexican Sheartail, but the best we could do were migrant Ruby-throated and resident Buff-bellied Hummingbirds. However, several other species put on a great show for us, including Rose-throated Becards, Altamira Orioles, Squirrel Cuckoo, and a very obliging Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl.

Continuing to the coast, we explored the beach and the small river that enters into the Gulf there. A variety of shorebirds were present, including Black-necked Stilt, Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Sanderling, and lone Short-billed Dowitcher and Semipalmated Plover. Adding to the waterbird show were our first Northern Jacana and Black-crowned Night-Heron and we picked out our only Gray-breasted Martin of the trip flying over the water with Barn Swallows.



We then drove to Chichicaxtle and the Mario Ramos Bird Observatory for an introduction to the hawk migration and some migration viewing (with a pit stop at the Bienvenido along the way). Most in the group took advantage of the opportunity to explore the offerings in the Pronatura gift shop at the observatory, but technical problems prevented us from fully viewing Pronatura Veracruz's wonderful migration video. On the platform, the migration was a bit slow, but we persisted and spotted Mississippi and White-tailed Kites, Broad-winged Hawk, and Peregrine Falcon. A variety of non-raptors also kept us amused, including Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Yellow-winged Tanager, Clay-colored Thrush, and Black-and-white Warbler. We then returned to the Hotel Bienvenido for lunch and a brief rest.

In the afternoon, we drove to the town of La Antigua to visit the Ermita del Rosario, the first Catholic church in the Americas, and then the nearby ruins known as the Casa de Cortés. The latter site was the primary portal through which all trade between Mexico and Spain passed in the 16th century and its remnants, held partly together by massive strangler figs, are still quite impressive. A local guide gave us tours of both sites with Kash very ably translating for the group. These tours were followed by one of the highlights of the trip: a boat trip on the Rio La Antigua from the town to the river mouth and back in the late afternoon. This trip is always a pleasure due to the scenery on the water, the light at the end of the day, and the presence of many, many birds. A few avian highlights of the trip included Ringed, Belted, Amazon, and Green Kingfishers; Aplomado and Peregrine Falcons; Merlin; Crested Caracara; and many shore- and waterbirds including Royal, Sandwich, and Gull-billed Terns. This very special boat trip was followed by an equally tasty dinner at the Las Delicias Marinas restaurant right by the boat landing area, which included mamey or coconut ice cream for some at the end! We then returned to the Bienvenido for the bird list and a well-earned night's sleep. Jay arrived at the Bienvenido after dinner, having been kindly picked up at the airport by Lindsay from Pronatura and so our tour group was finally at full strength.

Sat., Oct. 2 Cansaburro | Miramar Ecotourism Center

We started the day with another early and filling buffet breakfast at the Hotel Bienvenido. Then it was off to the coast again for a morning of birding at the viewing platform constructed by Pronatura in the Cansaburro Dunes



area. We used the small Pronatura pickup truck to get from the end of the passable road to the actual platform, so we arrived in several smaller groups, promptly commencing birding after we arrived. This rich area consists of a large wetland (though it was mostly dry at the moment) backed by some tall, forested dunes; we usually see a diversity of species at this spot. Some of the highlights found during our few hours there included a variety of parrots (White-fronted, Red-lored, and Yellow-headed; Olive-throated Parakeet), many Yellow-crowned Night-Herons in the wetland, Ruddy Crake and Collared Forest-Falcon heard calling, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and Dickcissels flying overhead, Morelet's Seedeater, Masked Tityra, and a pair of calling Couch's Kingbirds (our only confirmed sighting of this cryptic species on the tour).

After reuniting with Victor and our bus again (and getting good views of soaring Short-tailed and Broad-winged Hawks and some Anhingas), we continued north along the coast. We continued further north in the Sierra Manuel Diaz to a new site for this tour: the Parque Ecoturístico Miramar Viveros. Pronatura had been working with this private landowner to upgrade the tourist facilities and was conducting an experimental hawk count at the site, since it is basically at the very narrowest point of the coastal plan in Veracruz. Visiting this site involved a ride in pickup trucks up a very rough road followed by a pretty steep hike up a narrow trail to the viewing area—but, all agreed it was totally worth it! At the top was a flat, cleared area with chairs set up so we could admire the view and feel the lovely breeze, all the while keeping our eyes peeled for migrating birds.

The most interesting observation, at least to this writer, was the presence of many individuals of a species of planthopper (*Cerogenes auricoma*; apparently, there is no given English or Spanish name for this insect) which was present on the oak trees and often seen flying ephemerally through the canopy. Bob took the opportunity here to fully corrupt the group by identifying insects, among which was the handsome (and appropriately named) Filigree Skimmer. Despite these distractions, birds were also seen including some individuals of the local subspecies of Rufous-naped Wren (undoubtedly a future split since this population is isolated from others), Wood Storks, and several raptors including Hook-billed Kite, Short-tailed and Broad-winged Hawk, Common Black-Hawk, Osprey, and Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawk. Kash had very cleverly arranged for a local restaurant to bring up sandwiches to the site, so we ravenously devoured them (and the accompanying watermelon and tamarindo tea) while continuing to enjoy the view.



Making our way down the mountain, we returned to the bus and then to the Hotel Bienvenido for a rest before dinner, though a hardy few charged out for a last opportunity for hawk-watching at Chichicaxtle. We enjoyed another fine dinner at the Bienvenido and then the checklist before heading to our rooms to organize for departure the next day and to sleep.

Sun., Oct. 3 Las Barrancas | Alvarado | Tlacotalpan | Catemaco

After an early breakfast, we loaded everything into the bus and headed south to explore a new part of Veracruz. Following a pit stop at a Pemex along the highway, we arrived at the Las Barrancas area, a well-known coastal savannah birding site. This area contains a diverse mix of grasslands, cattle pasture, wetlands, and woodlands and always produces a very nice mix of bird species. No sooner had we stopped the bus and got out than we started to see very good things: Plain-breasted Ground-Dove, Plain Chachalaca, Blue-black Grassquit, Northern Mockingbird, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Hooded Oriole, and Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, to name a few. We continued on to explore the grasslands further in search of our primary target bird: Double-striped Thick-Knee. In one pasture, thanks to the hard work of Kash and Alan, we had success! Two thick-knees were well seen by the group through binoculars and scopes, a sighting cheered by all.

Our next stop was the town of Alvarado, located on the shores of the large wetland of the same name. Here we boarded a lancha for our second boat trip of the tour, this time out into the large wetland and its surrounding tall mangrove forests. Heading toward some of the narrower channels through the mangroves, we admired the interesting sight of a Magnificent Frigatebird perched on a pole, as well as many Neotropical Cormorants, Common Black-Hawks, kingfishers, and a variety of herons and egrets. Pulling the boats into a very narrow channel, we were rewarded with great views of a Rufous-breasted Spinetail right overhead and were able to find (and hear) Mangrove Warblers, which for some inexplicable reason are still considered Yellow Warblers despite looking and sounding quite different. Continued searching and listening yielded the call of a Sungrebe, Green-breasted Mango, Magnolia Warbler, and Yellow-billed Cacique. As a final treat, a Russet-naped Wood-Rail strolled over a mangrove branch at a leisurely pace, perhaps in search of one of the numerous crabs to be founded clinging to the mangrove roots.



After this, we enjoyed a very nice seafood lunch in Tlacotalpan (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) at the Restaurante Doña Lala where we were entertained by some local musicians. Continuing our southward journey, we arrived at the lovely Hotel Playa Azul on the shores of Lake Catemaco in the late afternoon, in time for a bit of informal birding before dinner at the Hotel La Finca in town.

Mon., Oct. 4 Nanciyaga Reserve | UNAM Biological Station | Montepio

We were up early for breakfast today, our first full day exploring the tropical forests of the Los Tuxtlas region. We headed out to the nearby Nanciyaga Ecological Reserve with its excellent tall-canopy forest (and one of the sites for the filming of *Apocalypto*!). Despite the rain, we saw and heard many sought-after birds, especially when the rain intermittently ceased for a while. Some of the memorable highlights included Mantled Howler Monkeys calling, Keel-billed Toucan, Collared Aracari, Scarlet Macaws (successfully reintroduced here), Montezuma Oropendola, and White-bellied Emerald. Exploring the reserve's boat dock resulted in brief glimpses of a Ruddy Crane walking through the water lettuce (two tours in a row have spotted this species off the dock!), many waterbirds, Vaux's Swift overhead, and a heard American Pygmy Kingfisher (to complete our kingfisher list for the tour). A variety of migrants were also noted, such as Kentucky, Hooded, and Magnolia Warblers; Least Flycatcher, and Yellow-throated Vireo. As we walked around the grounds, Alan gave us a wonderful explanation of what the temazcal was (analogous to a sweat lodge or a sauna) and the ceremony that takes place inside it; perhaps an option for a future tour?

All this exploring left us famished and we devoured an excellent lunch at the Reserve's restaurant while admiring the view over the Lake. Polishing off our meals, we then headed further into the Tuxtlas, stopping to bird at the UNAM Biological Station along the road. This area, very high in avian diversity, was productive with the group getting good looks at Lesson's Motmot; Collared, Gartered, and Black-headed Trogon; Golden-olive Woodpecker; Eye-ringed Flatbill; and Ivory-billed Woodcreeper. We then finished the day by heading all the way down to the coast to the town of Montepio, where we admired the view out over the Gulf, with a small flock of



Black-necked Stilts and some Spotted Sandpipers to entertain us. We then returned to the Hotel Playa Azul and went to dinner at the Hotel La Finca, where we did the bird list and discussed plans for the following day.

Tues., Oct. 5 Ruiz Cortines | Owling at Nanciyaga

This day was devoted to exploring the higher elevations of the Tuxtlas, primarily in and around the town of Ruiz Cortines, in search of two endemic species (Los Tuxtlas Quail-Dove and Long-tailed Sabrewing) and other species. Therefore, we got off to an early start, though continued to be plagued by overcast skies with some more light rain. Our first stops were along a road through the lovely cloud forest and, despite the wet conditions, we were able to extract Common Chlorospingus, Scaly-throated Foliage-Gleaner, and Slate-colored Solitaire from among the rain drops. Several times, ghostly White Morphos glided through the forests as if spirits of butterflies past had come to visit us. Unfortunately, despite playing its call, no sign of the Quail-Dove was had (nor the Ornate Hawk-Eagle which is regularly seen in this area). Unfortunately, it soon became wet enough that we retreated to the local community's restaurant (Los Colibries) for a needed mid-morning coffee, cookies, and baked calabasa.

After this refreshing break, the skies began to lighten up a bit and we walked around town to try to find a few more birds for the day. Success was finally had when Kash and Alan found a flowering Erythrina tree that had a Long-tailed Sabrewing continually visiting it to feed and perch! It was even viewable in a scope. A lot of other nice birds were seen in this very birdy town, including Morelet's Seedeater, Yellow-throated Euphonia, Bananaquit, Yellow-faced Grassquit, and Black-cowled Oriole. Having worked up an appetite at this point, we walked back to Los Colibries for lunch, recognizing the benefit that our visit made in supporting the local economy through ecotourism. Many of the group enjoyed the very tasty local specialty of memelas, kind of like a very large quesadilla folded over with a delectable filling, but made with very large and thick home made tortillas.

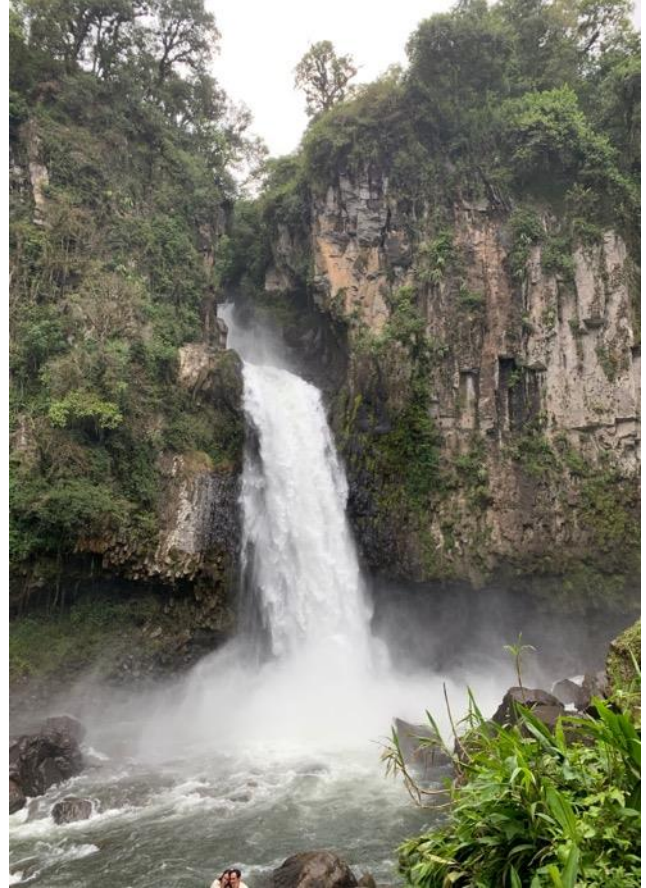


After lunch, we headed back to Catemaco with one more stop for roadside birding along the way out of Ruiz Cortines. The skies returned to their dreary, gray state, but we were able to hear White-breasted Wood-Wren and Tody Motmot calling along the trail, though they did not respond to our use of tape playback. After returning to the Hotel Playa Azul, we took a short break, had our final dinner at the Hotel La Finca, then reconvened at 8:00pm for an owling trip back to Nanciyaga Reserve. Despite the continued light rain, most of the group rallied to participate and we slowly drove and walked down the entrance road to the Reserve, playing a variety of owl species calls along the way. We were able to attract and get decent views of a Mottled Owl sitting on a branch overhead and heard another one calling, but that was all we could do with the wet weather. The group also enjoyed the firefly display while standing quietly and listening, which partly made up for the absence of other owls. We returned to the Hotel about 10:00pm for our final night in Catemaco.

Wed., Oct. 6 Hotel Playa Azul | Las Barrancas | Cardel

Due to our late evening the night before, this morning had a very leisurely start, with breakfast available from 7:00am on whenever the group wanted to get up! It also rained steadily throughout most of the morning, so most of the group enjoyed sitting and chatting while drinking coffee—we were nearly the only people staying at the hotel so we had the dining room pretty much to ourselves. Some used the time to catch up on e-mail. Later in the morning, the rain let up so we did some birding on the lovely grounds of the Playa Azul, which turned out to be fairly productive. Some of the group were able to spot a Violet Sabrewing thanks to Alan's amazing eyes and ears and another very cooperative Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl decided to perch out in the open for us. Kash also noticed that Collared Aracaris were nesting in a knothole in a tree right in the middle of the hotel grounds, so everyone eventually got good looks at this fun species. We then went for our final lunch at the Hotel La Finca (rudely interrupted by a fly-by Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture which caused the seats at the table to empty in a hurry!) and loaded up on our bus for the trip back north.

On our way back to Cardel, we made a stop at Las Barrancas, in search of species we had not seen on our previous visit. The late afternoon weather was superb, and the birds really put on a show for us at this magical spot. Flocks of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks flew by, a pair of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks with chicks was spotted in a pond, Aplomado Falcons weaved their way in and out, and Purple Gallinules and Northern Jacanas paraded around on the aquatic plants. To top it off, Bob spotted a Pinnated Bittern in the marsh, which we watched



slowly fly off in search of a better hiding place. We spent an inordinate amount of time discussing an intriguing bird spotted hiding in the marsh grasses. Despite our best efforts to turn it into a Yellow-breasted Crake, it proved to be a juvenile Sora; while not a lifer, it still was a fun find and the only one seen on the trip. Pulling ourselves away, we continued north with a stop at the very excellent roadside restaurant El Jarocho, which offered wonderful seafood including many variations of camarones. We finally straggled into the Hotel Bienvenido a bit late, though most had the energy to focus on compiling the bird list before heading to bed.

Thurs., Oct. 7 Rancho El Mirador | Coatepec | Cascada de Texolo

Up early, we had our buffet breakfast at the Hotel Bienvenido and were packed and on the road by 6:00am to head to the highlands of the Sierra Madre Oriental. Our first stop was the Rancho El Mirador, a certified shade coffee plantation with an excellent overstory of tall, epiphyte-laden trees covering the verdant coffee plants in the understory. El Mirador is a true birding hotspot (the eBird hotspot for here has 206 species recorded) and we enjoyed seeing many species very well without moving hardly at all! A sampling of species observed included Wilson's, Black-throated Green, Black-and-white, and Golden-crowned Warbler; many Baltimore Orioles; Red-legged Honeycreeper; Olivaceous Woodcreeper; Wedge-tailed Sabrewing; and Azure-crowned Hummingbird (our official eBird checklist for this site compiled by Alan totaled 56 species!). A lot of butterflies were spotted here, too, and identified by Bob, including Banded Peacock, Julia Heliconian, Longwing Crescent, Rosita Patch, and Pale-banded Crescent.

Although difficult to leave this spot, we eventually did so, having to continue our trip to Coatepec. We stopped for a delectable lunch at Restaurante Dulce in Totutla, before arriving at our lovely boutique hotel, the Casabella in Coatepec, in mid-afternoon. After checking into our rooms (some with an upstairs loft!), we reconvened in late afternoon to go to the nearby town of Xico to visit the Cascada de Texolo. Most of the group hiked down a



rather steep set of concrete stairs to get a marvelous view of the falls from near the base. Those who did this were rewarded with an American Dipper foraging along the river along with multiple photo opportunities. Returning to the top, we had good views of a small group of Black-headed Saltators foraging in some fruiting trees, as well as a Squirrel Cuckoo and some very noisy Band-backed Wrens.

Victor navigated the bus back up the long cobblestone entrance road and then back to the Casabella. We reconvened in a bit for a short walk to dinner at the Café Chéjere on its interior patio (although we were shocked and dismayed to learn that this lovely restaurant did not serve beer or wine—the horror!). We compiled our daily bird list there and discussed plans for the day, then returned to the Casabella for a pleasant rest.

Fri., Oct. 8 Macuiltepetl | Museum of Anthropology

Fully recovered, we then drove to the nearby town of Xalapa to spend the morning at the Parque Ecológico Macuiltepetl, a dormant volcanic cone right in the middle of the big town (Xalapa is the capitol of Veracruz). Since Kash had heard that Sergio Aguilar, the park's biologist, was working at the top, we hurried our way up various levels of stairways to get to the top near the park's small natural history museum. The reason for our hurry was that on some days, the extremely rare and endangered Bearded Wood-Partridge (reintroduced and thriving at this site) could be seen coming into feed on waste seed. Unsurprisingly, avian distractions abound at this site, so on the way up we were "delayed" by Summer Tanager, Blue-capped Motmot, Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Green Jay, and a Western Tanager. However, we persisted in our quest, arriving at the museum, where we quietly walked to a viewing area on the side of the volcano. Standing still and playing recordings,



everyone in the group was eventually rewarded with at least short glimpses of two wood-partridges running along the forest floor! This is a very sought-after bird that is on all birders' want lists for Veracruz—celebration all around. After this fun sighting, the museum opened for the day and the curators brought out their extensive collection of rehab raptors to their day perches outside. Although captive, it was fun and educational to see all the different species up close and study their intricate plumages. On display were several Red-tailed Hawks of light and dark morphs; White, Gray, Harris's, Common Black, and Roadside Hawks (the latter of which was extremely noisy); Crested Caracara; Laughing and Bat Falcon; Great Horned Owl; and a Black Vulture. Having had our fill at this point, we wound our way down the mountain, stopping to note the mobile groups of sawfly larvae found here and there (known locally as *caca de luna*) and yet more birds! Highlights of the trip down included Blue Mockingbird, Azure-crowned Hummingbird, Black-throated Green Warbler, Olive-sided Flycatcher, and Plain Chachalaca.

We had lunch today the lovely Estancia de los Tecajetes restaurant, located next to a park, where many enjoyed the delicious enchiladas with the local mole. Moving on (no rest for the weary on this trip, too much to see and do!) we went to the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa (MAX) for a visit to superb collection of Mexican anthropology/archeology, focusing on the pre-Hispanic cultures of the Mexican Gulf Coast. The building itself is an architectural masterpiece, well-designed to show off its impressive collection, including several of the colossal Olmec heads. We received a tour of the museum (as is normally part of our tours here) from Dra. Sagrario Cruz, a professora of anthropology at the Universidad Veracruzana, who added a lot of background detail and information to the displays.

After our tour concluded, we went for coffee-tasting at the Orovivo Café Bar in Coatepec for a chance to sample (and buy!) some of the delicious high-elevation coffee grown in and around Coatepec. The day concluded with a dinner at the Finca Andrade restaurant right off Coatepec's zocalo (which was closed for construction); we were joined at dinner by Elisa Peresbarbosa, the executive director of Pronatura Veracruz, who talked to us about the work of that conservation organization and thanked us for our support of their efforts. Much to the group's pleasure, this restaurant had beer and wine, so we fully enjoyed the conclusion of this excellent day, as usual doing the bird list and discussing the next day's plans before walking back to the Casabella.

Sat., Oct. 9 La Joya | Cruz Blanca/Las Minas | Laguna Alchichica

Our final day in the field started early with breakfast at the Casabella (but with no nasal probe!) and then loading the van. The sites to be visited today were all at higher elevations to allow the tour to sample new habitats not yet visited. So, off we went up into the Sierra Madre Oriental and the slopes of the Cofre de Perote; our first stop was the pine forests around the small community of La Joya. It was cloudy and cool up there (over



7,000 ft), but at a quick stop at a Pemex, we had the very odd and fun sighting of a pair of Hepatic Tanagers foraging in the grass, along with Acorn Woodpeckers in the trees and a Greater Pewee (my kind of pit stop!).

We then walked the trails around a set of old gravel mines, which was slow birding at first due to the cool and cloudy weather. Kash and Alan were able to find some of the local specialties, such as Brown-backed Solitaire, Golden-browed Warbler, and Mountain Trogon with diligent searching and using some playback. Finally, however, we got into a more open area as the clouds lifted a bit and the temperatures rose, and we were able to watch a large mixed-species flock of birds foraging, with good views of many species. Among this group were Mexican Chickadees; Crescent-chested, Olive, Townsend's, Hermit, Black-throated Green, Wilson's, and Black-and-white Warblers; and Gray Silky-Flycatcher. It was also fun to see more familiar species, like American Robin and Steller's Jay, in the pine forests at this elevation. We next drove a bit of the road from Cruz Blanca to Las Minas, which passes by a steep canyon carved into the Sierra. Our primary target here was to look for Striped Sparrow, which unfortunately we were not able to locate. But many other species were seen in the grasses and pine trees along the road, most new to our trip list, including Eastern Bluebird, Yellow-eyed Junco, Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker, Brown Creeper, and Cordilleran Flycatcher. Stopping at the roadside shrine/spring where many locals were getting their water, we admired the spectacular view out over the canyon with waterfalls on the far side. Unfortunately, there were few birds to be seen here, except for Broad-winged and Red-tailed Hawk.

Continuing our way, we crossed over the edge of the mountains onto the altiplano, much drier and with less vegetation due to the rain shadow effect. We stopped in the town of Perote for (yet another!) excellent lunch at the Café Roma Restaurante, which was oddly nearly empty of other diners. After lunch, we continued on to one of the altiplano lakes nearby, the Laguna Alchichica. This lake, which actually occupies a volcanic crater, is Mexico's deepest natural lake, and has extensive stromatolite (from Wikipedia: "layered sedimentary formations that are created by photosynthetic cyanobacteria" that are some of the oldest forms of life known on earth) formations in and around it. A comment was made about the resemblance of these deposits to the well-known tufa formations around Mono Lake which is appropriate; the lake is both saline and alkaline. In winter, the lake harbors large flocks of Eared Grebes, American Coots, and some ducks and harbors an endemic

salamander, fish, and isopod. The desert scrub habitat (and a few isolated Eucalyptus trees) proved as interesting to the birders as the lake, with the group finding Loggerhead Shrike, Lesser Goldfinch, Black-chinned Sparrow, Curve-billed Thrasher, Canyon Towhee, and Bullock's Oriole during the hour or so we spent there—most of these were new to the list and illustrate both the desertic nature of the area of the altiplano and the southwestern species composition of the avifauna there. The lake itself had a few grebes and coots swimming around for us to put the scopes on. After this, we had to leave and Victor turned the bus around and off we went, making a quick stop on the Tepeyahualco Road to try to find Burrowing Owl. Although we could not spot any owls, we did see some Perote Ground Squirrels and a Loggerhead Shrike. Continuing on, we headed down the mountains for the city of Veracruz for our final night at the Hotel Mocambo, dropping Alan off along the way in Xalapa so he could return home. Arriving there, we checked in and then met in the dining room for our final dinner together and last bird list to celebrate the conclusion of the tour. The dinner was topped off by the making, by our table, of a totally new example of Veracruz desert cuisine: the instantly legendary “Platanos Flamencos” (in English: Flaming Flamingoed Bananas), requested by Jay and designed and cooked on the spot by the chef at the Hotel Mocambo! A desert never to be forgotten (and probably never cooked again!).

Sun., Oct. 10 | Departures

Kash and Victor took everyone leaving today to the airport, with an early group headed to either Houston or Mexico City leaving in the morning darkness and several more leaving later in the morning. And that marked the end of the 2021 edition of Naturalist Journeys' Veracruz River of Raptors tour.

Map of Locations Visited

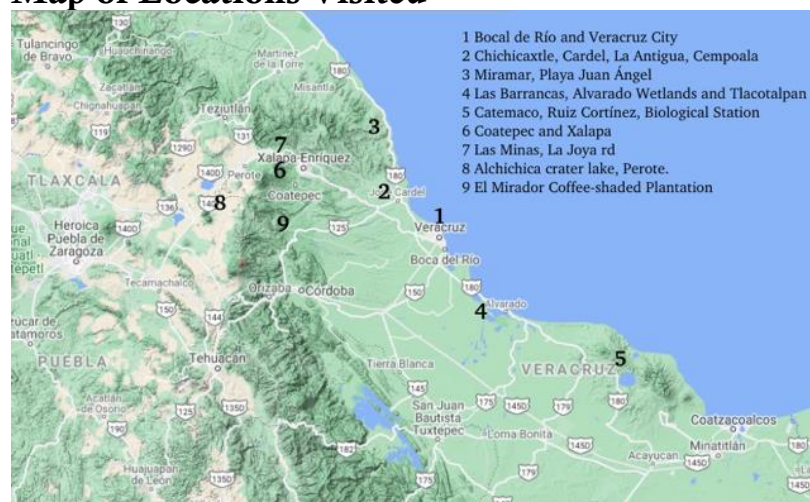


Photo Credits:

Group 1 (David Mehlman - DM), Mocambo Sunrise (DM), Bienvenido roof (DM), Laughing Falcon (DM), Group Hawkwatch (DM), Archeological Site (DM), Olive-throated Parakeet (Valerie Gebert), Green Kingfisher (Tom Dove), Filigree Skimmer (DM), Miramar (DM), Group Viewing (DM), Wood Stork (Bob Rodrigues), Plant Hopper (DM), Alvarado (DM), Group boat trip (DM), Nanciyaga (DM), Golden Silk Spider (DM), American Pygmy Kingfisher (Carlos Sanchez), Mantled Howler Monkey (Ted Beedy), Lunch (DM), Cloud Forest (DM), Ruiz Cortines (DM), Violet Saberwing (Lori Conrad), Mottled Owl (Steve Shunk), Texolo Group (DM), Wedge-tailed Sabrewing (DM), Cascada Texolo (DM), Black-headed Saltator (Gerold Morrison), Squirrel Cuckoo (Susan Hartley - SH), Group at Museum (DM), Coffee Tasting (DM), Leucanella Caterpillar (DM), Crested Caracara (PARO), Las Minas Roadside (DM), Laguna Alchichica (DM), Greater Pewee (SH), Mexican Chickadee (Peg Abbott)