

Naturalist Journeys Oaxaca Valley, Mexico | Trip Report | October 20-26, 2021 | by Peg Abbott



Guides David MacKay, Carlos Gonzales, with Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys and 8 participants: Andy, Ann, Betsy, Bev, Debbie, Don, Lynn, and Walter.



Finding our way to one of Mexico's most magical pueblos, Oaxaca, in the midst of 2021 and its continuing challenges was just a treat. We coordinated with colleagues of Solipaso, David MacKay and Carlos Gonzales for a great week of birding, while enriching ourselves in the culture at the start. Several of the group and Peg then ventured on with Erik Martinez guiding to cabins up in the mountains for more great days of birding. Our next trip with Erik will feature this area in addition to Oaxaca Valley.



Early Arrivals – Time to Explore the Culture and Food of Oaxaca City

Many of our group came in early, wanting to see the legendary city in more detail. Peg chose for us Hotel La Parra, which proved to be just perfect. It was quiet, boutique, small and close enough to walk to all we wanted to see. This hotel's patient, lovely staff assisted us when we had questions, gave us some great dining recommendations and steered us to galleries, shops and historic sites. Everyone did their own thing, but we enjoyed sunlit breakfasts together on the sunlit courtyard patio, and evenings together to dine. It was great to compare notes, share camaraderie yet be free to explore as we wished.

One afternoon we made our way to the village of Teotitlan, famous for its quality weavings. The art has passed down through several generations and we found it fascinating to learn about the various natural dyes, techniques and traditions. The pandemic had hindered sales, so they were thrilled when several of us selected take-home treasures. The care and craftsmanship in each one was apparent and we all left with big bright smiles.

The city is as magnificent as it is described, and we found ourselves enchanted by evening lights on centuries old buildings, church bells and steeples, art in profusion, and all the color and life. We designed this short tour so people could combine a passion for nature and birding with city time and found Oaxaca to be a great place to do just that. It was fun to just walk around and take it all in, festive doorframes, metal and wood framed windows, balconies, rooftops. The old theatre was a gorgeous building; several bakeries drew our eye with their



scrumptious creations. We found a bit of geology in seeing a green limestone used quite commonly, mined from a nearby quarry. Flowers filled some of the walkways and Day of the Dead decorations were more apparent each day. Don and Ann had dear friends by happenstance there at the same time, so they joined us for several meals, and that was an added treat.

Wed., October 20 Welcome to Oaxaca

Ahead of the welcome dinner that would start our tour, several of us enjoyed a cooking class, Lynn had stepped up to the plate and researched it and she found a good one. We started early afternoon, walking over to a market where we saw many of the fresh ingredients we would use while preparing a variety of dishes.

David MacKay and Debbie, traveling through Mexico City were the last of our group to arrive, but Carlos was there to shepherd us and after several days on our own we were old hands at navigating the city.

We packed up from Hotel La Parra and taxied over to Hotel Corazon, a gem of a hotel, small and simple, where profits from tourism go to a cause. They made us feel most welcome and we started birding right away, watching Vermilion Flycatcher, Tropical Kingbird and Great Kiskadee in Flamboyant tree blossoms from the



hotel's open roof deck. With our flock complete we headed to our welcome dinner at Danzantes, not far from the Cathedral. Here we tried different moles and tempting dishes while sitting in an inside courtyard, open to the sky but tucked in from the weather. It was fun to get to know each other and learn plans for the week ahead.

Thurs., October 21 Road to Monte Alban | Monte Alban Archeological Site | Parque Juarez.

Time to start birding! Our hotel was great about making early breakfast so we could be off to start the day. The ruins at Monte Alban opened later than normal, so we had several quiet hours to enjoy the entrance road with little traffic. Almost just out of the bus three Blue Mockingbirds chased each other and called, moving from tree to tree. For this skulker of a species it was quite a show.

Two Rufous-capped Warblers then put on a good show, coming down low in shrubs by the roadway in perfect view. We had a flurry of raptors fly by, White-tailed Kite, Peregrine, and Swainson's Hawk, and a nice mixed flock of warblers with a particularly good view of a Virginia's. Several local trees were in vibrant bloom, and we had some fine views back on the city below.



At Monte Alban, David turned us loose to explore – we took in what we could but longed for more explanation of the ruins and culture so famous here. Good inspiration for post-tour reading and we'll be prepared for next year. There were numerous buildings, some intricate carvings, etchings, block structures, ball parks and a lot to take in. It was not crowded at all and by weather standards it was a beautiful day.

After time at the ruins, we went to the nearby small restaurant of our driver Rafael's wife, the Casa de Mami, and here enjoyed some of the most delicious food of the trip. She was ready for us with various dishes to try. Most memorable was the Mola Coloradito, but also delicious was the fresh guacamole, salsas, various meats and sweets. It was a highlight to enjoy this meal and feel so welcome by the family. In the afternoon after a short break back at the hotel, we went to a city park in Oaxaca, Parque Juarez (El Llano), a good spot for birds with large trees creating a greenspace. Right out of the bus we spied a flock of forty-plus Gray Silky Flycatchers, noisy and feeding in the larger trees. We walked about, finding Summer Tanager, Inca Dove, Nashville and Yellow warblers, and our first endemic, the Dusky Hummingbird. After freshening up, we enjoyed a delightful dinner at Restaurante Catedral tonight. This restaurant made a wonderful arugula salad which included small wontons filled with goat cheese to start us off. There was a good guitar player as well.



Fri., October 22 Into the Sierra Madres

Today, after breakfast at the Hotel Corazon, we ventured up into the mountains, Raphael driving the curving road with ease. As we climbed in elevation the vegetation changed to pines, and by the time we stopped we were surrounded by very tall, impressive pines with other conifers mixed in. The Lummholtz Pines, a signature tree of the Sierra Madres, with their long, weeping needles were something to behold. We found a mixed flock almost immediately and David and Carlos started calling them out. The name RED Warbler went out like an electric current to the group, and we all focused in to get super views of this crimson wonder with its white “check” patches. This endemic was high on everyone’s wish list, and now that we were in its favored terrain, they were not hard to find. This first pair was joined by Slate-colored Redstart, Black-and-white Warbler, Olive Warbler, Townsend’s and Wilson’s Warblers and other species. A bit farther down the road we found a pair of Golden-browed Warbler in low shrubbery that gave us superlative views, curious about David’s almost constant Pygmy Owl calling. This species was new to most of the group as well.

We piled back into the bus and were cruising the wooded roads when Rafael heard an important endemic to the highlights, Gray-barred Wren. Out we went to what felt like a circus show, a flock of noisy, busy, determined wrens, accompanied by Hairy Woodpecker and Steller’s Jay. Lynn made a gasp and said loudly, “Mountain Trogon”. She had good looks, but few others got on it quick enough, her bird of the day!

Our next stop we walked downhill alongside a small, shrubby ravine packed with a blooming shrub. The call of Mexican Violetear, a most dazzling hummingbird, was almost constant and we watched them feed on flowers and chase each other about. They were joined by White-eared Hummingbird, some which came quite close to



us. Mexican Chickadee, Hermit Warbler joined what we now recognized as the “regular” mixed flock of Red Warbler, Slate-throated Redstart, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Wilson’s Warbler.

By the morning’s end we’d secured good sightings of Crescent-chested Warbler, Brown-backed Solitaire and Collared Towhee. We had one of the most remarkable moments of the trip, when three Long-tailed Wood Quail, a very elusive species, came out on the road. David and Rafael had seen them cross the road, and David tried a bit of playback from the bus, prepping us to be ready but not really expecting they would respond. Voila! Out they came in fine view, though jostling our seats to see them while being quiet was a challenge, most of the group got a look. We welcomed rest at Café de Colobri, and we were entertained by Blue-throated Mountain Gems that came right into the feeders of the outside raised deck we ate at. We were hungry and had been cold (weather was drizzly this day) so rich Mexican-style hot chocolate was most welcome, as were homemade soups and bread. The mountain views were pleasant and the temperature cool if not a bit cold.

About 3PM we made one more stop, and it was quite productive. We found three more hummingbird species, Rivoli’s, Amethyst-throated and Broad-tailed, and had two Red Crossbill come in and land above our heads. We worked an area open where two roads intersected, above a small farm. We worked a hedgerow of flowers watching a Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer feed alongside an Orange-crowned Warbler. A Woodhouse Scrub Jay called as it fed on insects by the corral and drew our attention up the road. But it was far overshadowed by an agitated Collared Towhee which answered David’s call and proceeded to display with gusto, perching on a wooden post in clear view. It then followed us up the hill as we spied a Rufous-capped Brushfinch as if to say,



keep looking at me. We could take iPhone videos of it, so close and confiding. White-throated Towhee were also there, a very good stop for endemics.

We had a short break back at the hotel to freshen up and headed to a delicious dinner at Las Quince Letras. It was a delightful place of modern décor, again with an open roof to the sky, and with a tree growing in the dining space. It was quite lively and fun to watch locals enjoying themselves as well. We sat at two tables, ordering artisan dishes. The three-mole combo was popular as was some very fresh guacamole. Some tried shrimp with a corn and coconut crust – so many good dishes to choose from!

Sat., October 23 Teotitlan Reservoir | Rancho Zapata | Yagul

This morning we headed up to the famous rug-making village of Teotitlan, stopping not far from the turn up there to bird in the open terrain. We got good views of a Rock Wren atop a farmhouse and two Bouvard's Wren calling and courting nearby. There were big flocks of Rough-winged Swallows aloft, and a Red-tailed Hawk. We had fun watching White-throated Towhee, various warblers, and made a couple of stops before the reservoir. The reservoir gave us a chance to find some aquatic-associated species, both Belted and Green Kingfishers, Killdeer and Least Sandpiper, a Little Blue Heron and a Great Egret. We walked around one of the narrow arms toward a small farmhouse, getting very nice views of Gray-xx Woodpecker. Two men were herding donkeys loaded with firewood ahead of them, all in a day's work. We had lunch at Rancho Zapata, a western-style place with a nice patio and good food. Good birds too the woodpecker we'd try so hard to get close to landed on the large columnar cacti at the entrance for very good views. Peg walked around back and spied a Loggerhead Shrike



and three Rufous-backed Robins feasting on berries. The afternoon light was just stunning as we stopped to look for birds on the road to Yagul. The landscape here was captivating with mountains all around, and long valley protruding into them. There were many blooms, and we trained our eye on a patch of blooming cacti, with luck finding Beautiful Hummingbird. Back in the city we freshened up and headed to yet another outstanding dinner at the Oasis.

Sun., October 24 Local Valley Birding | Road to Atzompa

We had more spots in the valley on our list to explore, and today we explored making a series of stops. White puffy clouds decorated the horizon on an otherwise bright sunny day. We made four stops this morning, pulling out the scope to examine a Green-fronted Hummingbird, not expected here, and then walking downslope along some cliffs we spied a non-avian highlight of the day, quite an amazing caterpillar. By all standards this day-glow lime green creature with an aqua-colored head took us by surprise. We made four stops this morning, all on unnamed roads, picking up a few new species at each place including Western Wood Pewee, Scrub Euphonia and both Scott's and Streak-backed Orioles. Near a small ravine we spent time watching Berylline Hummingbird and got very nice views of a pair of Dwarf Vireo.

In the afternoon we walked a quiet road to another archeological site, Atzompa, that was closed, but the views were fine back towards town and the birding was pretty good. We had a nice show of raptors with two White-tailed Hawks soaring overhead, then a Sharp-shinned Hawk, Swainson's Hawk and a Crested Caracara. And this was place of the memorable "singing bush". Though we saw 31 species, we did not see the endemic Slaty Vireo that sang and sang and sang, first down in a ravine, then up very close to us but inside of a dense bush. It was a twenty-minute project to no avail and that one would remain for us, a Heard Only species. Sigh. Still, it was good to walk (this one uphill) and be out and we'd seen so much to this point we felt satisfied. Dinner at Tres3 Bistro this night was both delicious and fun, our seating was where we could look out on the Zocalo and watch the passersby.



Mon., October 25 Return to the Mountains | Café Colobri | Tuxtepec

David got a surprise birthday candle on his breakfast this morning, a birding trip birthday is like bringing your own party with you to celebrate! We wished him a good bird for the day. Back up into the mountains today and this time the weather was cooperative. We had a banner day! Our most important find and not an easy to come by one was a flock of Dwarf Jay. We had stopped by a bend in the road where water crossed, and they came across the side-hill at eye-level, so we got good views. We added Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and were most pleased with some cracking views of Russet-Nightingale Thrush. We had better look at Crescent-chested Warbler and who would not delight in repeated looks at Red Warbler and their attendant coterie of species. More time with Gray-barred Wrens was fun, and we finally logged a Common Raven. Lunch was back at Café Colobri and we tried various dishes including Chile Rellenos. Bev spied an Acorn Woodpecker, a familiar species but the first for our trip. Peg got onto a mixed flock back by the bathrooms and called the others over. Here was a small explosion with a Pileated Flycatcher, Collared Towhee, MacGillivray's Warbler, Hutton's Vireo, Crescent-chested and Townsend's Warbler and a crazy plumaged Spotted Towhee unique to this area.



We made a stop at a lower elevation near Tuxtepec for our grand finale and to our delight found a new group of species. Tufted Flycatcher and Greater Pewee performed feeding sallies, and we found Northern Beardless Flycatcher, Elegant Euphonia and a Tennessee Warbler. There were flowers in bloom, the sun was warm and bright, no one wanted to give up on birding! Dinner was at Tierra del Sol Casa Restaurant, overlooking the cathedral. We needed a later dinner time to give ourselves a freshen-up break than planned, and Rafael suggested this wonderful rooftop location. It was perfect, beautiful lit across from such an impressive historical site. The waiter came to our table to make fresh salsa and it was delicious. We had fresh fish, various moles, margaritas and wine. And merriment, a rare commodity these days, we laughed and had fun. Walter gave a gracious toast to our guides. We noted our highlights as a summary of the field time spent in the southern Sierra Madres and the Oaxaca Valley. A fine trip!

Tues., October 26 Departures | Scouting the Southern Sierra Madres

Our flock dispersed today, most leaving for home. A fine day for flying, Lynn sent a photo of snow-capped Pico de Orizaba, the third highest mountain in North America, highest in Mexico, a stratovolcano. Wow! Another moment of awe while traveling.

Extension to the Sierra Madres del Sur at Puesto del Sol Cabins with Erik Martinez | October 26-29, 2022

Peg, Don, Ann, and Debbie stayed on to explore a bit more with local expert Erik Martinez. Next year our Oaxaca trip will be longer and take in the southern mountains and a route down to the coast. The biodiversity here is legendary and we wanted to take a peek. We stayed on for more birding and botanizing in the southern part of



the Valley, ventured up into the southern Sierra Madres, and took a dip over the divide to lower moist elevations at the La Pluma Hildago area. Our base was the delightful Puesto del Sol, where birds were plentiful right on the grounds. This excursion added about forty species for us, some new endemics, but was also just a superb contrast to time in the city. The cabins were cozy, and the restaurant was good. The trails between cabins let us get good views of orioles, wintering warblers, tanagers and other species without going very far at all. They loved gardening and we were charmed by the planters and blooms. Active hummingbirds at the feeders included the incredible Garnet-throated Hummingbird and seeing it well was a treat. The endemic Bumblebee Hummingbird was a garden regular and put on quite a show. And we continued our tradition of eating well. Don had done some research and led us the second night to an Italian restaurant in town, La Taberna de los Duendes, which was incredible – we returned there our third night as it was so delicious.

We took several field trips away, driving farther down the busy highway with its many twists and turns, but finding quiet roads to smaller villages from which we could walk, bird and explore. Most memorable at the higher elevations were wonderful mixed flocks of warblers, Red, Crescent-chested, Townsend's, Hermit and more. They were joined by flycatchers, Brown Creeper, Yellow-eyed Junco and more. One day we crossed over the divide and started down towards the coast, walking a road at La Pluma. We hit the jackpot seeing a host of new species from Green Jay to Northern Emerald Toucanet to some of the region's endemics. Erik shared a local restaurant owned by friends that had wonderful birding and some crafts for sale.

Returning to Oaxaca City our final day there were many more Day of the Dead decorations about and what seemed to be a million marigolds displayed. We loved having a peek at it but disappearing before the crowds. Oaxaca we will return!

Photo Credits: Oaxaca Door (Peg Abbott - PA), Oaxaca Buildings (PA), Coffee (Bev Robertson - BR), Peg (Don Hughes - DH), Flowering plant (Betsy Hamann - BH), Templo de Santo Domingo (PA), Group at dinner (PA), Dinner table (PA), Taste Test (PA), Cooking class (PA), Cooking class 2 (PA), Monte Alan Ruins (PA), Bridled Sparrow (PA), Scenic (BR), Cacti (BH), Roadside hats (Ann Hughes - AH), Insect (AH), Gray Silky (PA), Mountain view w/ home (BR), Scenic 1 (BR), Collared Towhee (PA), Butterfly (BH), Scenic 2 (BR), Green Kingfisher (Tom Dove - TD), Rufous-capped Warbler (David McKay), Scenic (PA), Donkey with wood (PA), Butterfly 1 (BH), Caterpillar (BH), Red Warbler ([www.flickr.com/photos/francesco_veronesi/22444216014:](http://www.flickr.com/photos/francesco_veronesi/22444216014/).jpg), Dwarf Jay ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dwarf_jay#:media:File:Dwarf_Jay_\(Cyanolyca_nana\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dwarf_jay#:media:File:Dwarf_Jay_(Cyanolyca_nana).jpg)), Flower (BR), Green Jay (TD), Erik & Peg (DH), Peg (DH), Bumblebee Hummingbird (PA)