

Guatemala: Birds & Nature | Trip Report

January 10 – 20, 2022 | by Rick Weiman



With host Rick Weiman, local guide Roland Rumm, and participants Doug, Peter, & Theresa



Mon., Jan. 10

Arrivals in Guatemala City

Today was arrival day. Our group met in the lobby and then took a short walk from our Hotel Clarion in Guatemala City to a nearby Mediterranean restaurant. We enjoyed some complimentary welcome drinks and a meal of various tapas as we got to know each other before starting our Guatemala adventure the next day.

Tues., Jan. 11

Cayala Park | Cerro Alux | Zunil highlands

After a delicious buffet breakfast at our hotel our excited small group of travelers packed our bags and headed to Cayala Ecological Park and its 14 acres of natural forests and trail on the eastern edge of Guatemala City. Soon after parking our van, we heard the calls of several Black-headed Saltators and Bushy-crested Jays and got



some excellent looks. A Lesson's Motmot made an appearance as well picking berries off a tree. Roland's imitation of the call of a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl not only popped up a MacGillvray's Warbler, but an actual Pygmy-Owl flew out of the scrub and perched on a branch above our heads wondering what all the commotion was about. A short distance on the trail led us to several mixed flocks of warblers (11 total species) including Hooded, Blue-Winged, Townsend's, and Magnolia. Over 40 species of birds were counted in under 2 hours, with the highlight being a pair of the difficult to spot White-eared Ground Sparrows which Doug captured some excellent pictures of. Cerro Alux Park was our next stop and a short visit resulted in several new species like Hermit Warbler, Hutton's Vireo, Crescent-chested Warbler, and Spot-crowned Woodcreeper. Close looks were also had on 3 usually skulky wren species – Band-backed, Rufous-browed and Cabani's Wren. Then it was off to lunch at Cabana Suiza's where their hummingbird feeders were swarming with 5 different species including the regionally endemic Rufous Sabrewing. A family flock of Stellar's Jays also flew in. We then drove the windy scenic roads to 9,000 feet elevation, passing several of Guatemala's approximately 37 volcanoes along the way, to our Las Culbres hotel in Quetzaltenango, our home for the next two nights.

Wed., Jan. 12 Fuentes Georginas

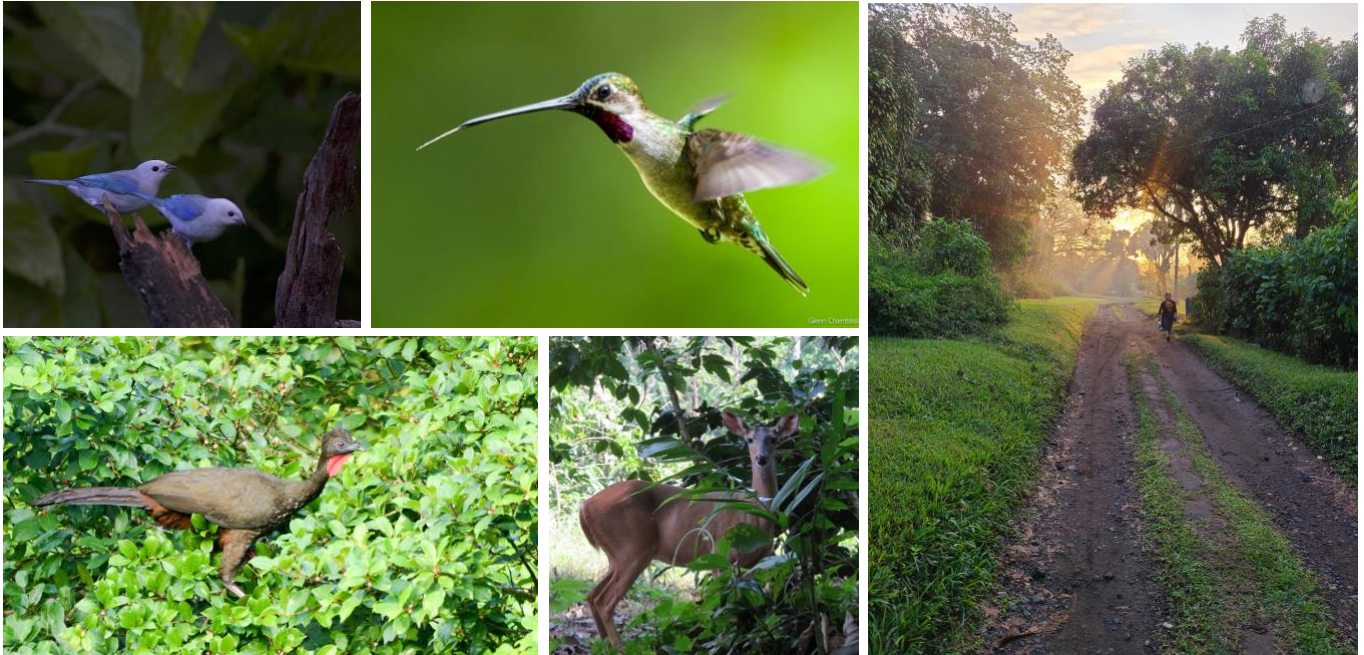
After breakfast at the hotel, we drove the windy road up the dormant Zulina volcano to Fuentes Georginas, an area with an incredibly steep valley. Locals and tourists come here for the refreshing hot springs, and we were hoping to spot several regionally endemic birds that live at this high elevation. Here we birded the road overlooking the forested valley. Before long we had wonderfully close looks at a pair of Pink-headed Warblers that were joined by a flock of Common Chlorospingus. Then the hummingbird show started with great views of multiple calling and feeding Mexican Violetears and several diminutive Wine-throated Hummingbirds, with two of them sparring in the air right in front of us. Good views were also had of Amethyst-throated Mountain Gem, Garnet-throated Hummingbird, and White-eared Hummingbird. A flock of Unicolored Jays flew by with their dark-blue color flashing in the sunlight and we watched a Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer searching for nectar almost too close to us for our binoculars.



As we ate lunch overlooking the valley as several dozen Black-capped Swallows circled overhead and the calls of a Northern Emerald Toucanet could be heard. After lunch a mist of clouds rolled in and filled the valley, so we decided to head back to the hotel and rest. We then had an early fresh pasta dinner and returned to Zulina just before dusk to try and call in some owls such as Fulvous and Unspotted Saw-whet. Unfortunately, we had no luck with the owls, but we did hear the calls of several Mexican Whippoorwills and a lonely Ring-Tailed Cat, as the international space station passed overhead in the clear moon-lit sky. Returning to the hotel some of us lit a nice warm fire in our hotel room's stone fireplace.

Thurs., Jan. 13 Los Tarrales Reserve

After another wonderful breakfast we said goodbye to Quetzaltenango and high elevation birding for the Pacific lowlands and the Los Tarrales Reserve which protects humid, subtropical forest located on the southeastern slope of Atitlán Volcano. Here, natural forest is interspersed with shade coffee plantations from 2300 to 5200 feet. As soon as we entered the reserve we spotted a Black Phoebe, several striking White-throated Magpie Jays, and the regionally endemic White-bellied Chachalaca. Sitting quietly in the shade by the fruit feeder outside our rooms we witnessed an array of birds visit with the Black-headed Saltators and Great-Tailed Grackles ruling the roost. Yellow-throated Euphonias, Yellow-winged Tanagers and Clay-colored Thrushes also flew in for a snack. Cinnamon Hummingbirds along with migratory Ruby-throated Hummingbirds enjoyed the flowers in the hedgerows and Spot-Breasted, Baltimore, and Orchard Orioles were seen multiple times. After a family-style lunch of roasted chicken we hiked the lagoon trail to a small pond on the property. There we were treated to a pair of Neotropical River Otters swimming in the pond as well as a Least Grebe. A perched Bat Falcon and a Crested Caracara were viewed through the scopes, and a calling Collared Forest Falcon flew passed us and perched for some quick looks. Many other new birds for our trip were added as we walked the surrounding trails with Long-Billed Gnatwren, Lineated Woodpecker, Ivory-Billed Woodcreeper, and Turquoise-browed Motmot among the favorites. After a unique and delicious Guatemalan style lasagna dinner, a Common Paraque and a Mottled Owl could be heard calling, which was a great way to end our first day at Los Tarrales.



Fri., Jan. 14

Los Tarrales Reserve

After an early buffet style breakfast, we climbed up the mountain in a 4-wheel drive vehicle driven by one of the local guides Alfredo to the La Isla overlook at about 3500 feet elevation. Our main target birds were White Hawk and Azure-rumped Tanager. As we waited hopefully for a hawk sighting, several large Crested Guans glided down the valley. In the distance a Highland Guan was also heard calling. Dozens of Tennessee Warblers were feeding around us along with Red-Legged Honeycreepers and White-throated Thrushes. An immature male Long-Tailed Manakin was briefly spotted as well. After about ½ hour our patience was rewarded as a magnificent White Hawk effortlessly floated past us and perched in a far-off tree offering great looks through our scopes. Off in the distance we heard a Black Hawk-Eagle call and then watched as it circled high over the valley. Several new hummingbirds fed in the flowering trees at our look-out including Long-Billed Starthroat, White-bellied Emerald, and Blue-throated Goldentail. We did hear the Azure-rumped Tanagers but never got good looks at them. It was a rainy afternoon, so we stayed dry in the gazebo overlooking for the fruit feeder and compared differences between Yellow-throated and Scrub Euphonias as they feasted on bananas. Several Lesson's Motmots flew in as did 3 species of Oriole, a pair of Blue-Gray Tanagers, and the usual mix of Saltators, Grackles and Thrushes (Swainson's and Clay-Colored). Several Agoutis fed under the hanging fruit and a large Brown Basilisk Lizard ran into the underbrush. Dinner at the lodge was in the open-air gazebo where freshly made pizzas were pulled piping hot out of the outdoor wood-fired pizza oven.

Sat., Jan. 15

Los Tarrales Reserve | Lake Atitlan

Our day started at 5:30am so we could watch the eruption of the Fuego volcano while it was still dark. The top of the volcano is viewable from Los Tarrales as Fuego belches out smoke and lava in minor eruptions every 7 – 20 minutes. We were lucky to witness 4 eruptions in our 30 minutes of volcano watching. After that excitement and our buffet breakfast we hiked to a bird blind on the property deep in the forest where rice is spread on the ground to attract seldom seen birds. We were rewarded for our early start by having views of Thicket Tinamou, White-eared Ground Sparrow, and White-Tipped Doves.



We birded on the forest trails the rest of the morning slowly climbing up in elevation. Several exciting new birds were checked off such as Violet Sabrewing, a pair of Red-throated Ant Tanagers, the secretive Tody Motmot, and a Collared Trogon. Our Bat Falcon was back on its perch enjoying a morning meal of Tropical Kingbird. After lunch we enjoyed the parade of birds that visited the hanging banana bunch feeder including 7 Collared Aracari's and our favorite orange birds, the Spot-Breasted, Baltimore, and Altamira Orioles. An afternoon hike on the property led to more surprises like a perched and singing Striped Cuckoo, a pair of White-faced Ground Sparrows, a Chestnut-capped Warbler, and a Rufous-breasted Spinetail. Joining a large kettle of vultures was a Peregrine Falcon who we watched snatch a swift out of the air. We reluctantly had to leave the amazing Los Tarrales Reserve for a short ride to our next destination, the Atitlan Lake region. Before dinner a few of us birded the gardens and trees at the Hotel Toliman and spotted a male Cape May Warbler, a rare migrant to inland Guatemala and a country record for our excited local guides Roland and Alfredo.

Sun., Jan. 16 Mirador del Rey Tepepul

This morning was an early one as left the hotel around 5:30 with a to-go breakfast and set off for our birding destination of the day: Mirador del Rey Tepepul located on the slope of the dormant volcano Atitlan at around 5500 feet. We hiked into the wet, lush forest on a steep and winding centuries old narrow trail to search for the Resplendent Quetzal, and many other new birds as well. Our local guide Alfredo knew the forest well and we soon had wonderful views of Black Thrush, Mountain Thrush, a flock of feeding Hooded Grosbeak in some trees next to the trail, a perched and singing male Elegant Euphonia (gorgeous!), and several Northern Emerald Toucanets. After about 1.75 miles we reached the area where the Resplendent Quetzals were known to frequent, and our guides quickly spotted a perched female. Despite our patience and best efforts, we unfortunately did not see the male (this time!). The trail back had several new birds to enjoy such as Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, Scaly-throated Foliage Gleaner, Green-throated Mountain-gem, and the tiny Emerald-chinned Hummingbird.



After an outdoor lunch at the beautiful Bambu Hotel on the shore of Lake Atitlan, we visited the IMAP permaculture farm area located in San Lucas Toliman. IMAP stands for Instituto Mesoamericano de Permacultura and promotes permaculture, sustainable agriculture, organic seed and vegetable production, and the fair trade of seeds in Guatemala. Their reach and influence apparently stretch out over all Central and Latin America. They also emphasize the importance of recovering, guarding, and teaching Mayan ancestral knowledge. Part of the property borders Lake Atitlan and the clear, fresh water gave us great views of Green Heron, Common & Purple Gallinule, Spotted Sandpiper, Lesser Scaups, dozens of American Coots, several hundred Mangrove Swallows, and in the vegetable gardens, a perched Slender Sheartail. Returning to our hotel in the late afternoon we decided to again bird from the restaurant deck area overlooking the garden while we enjoyed some cocktails. Several Rose Breasted Grosbeaks and a pair of Black-vented Orioles were quickly spotted. Then the excitement began. We watched a Long-Tailed Weasel emerge from the garden and climb up a large tree. It then grabbed a large rodent it either killed or had stashed in the tree and fell to ground with it in its jaws. We captured pictures of the weasel carrying away its prey and dodging the local house cat in the process. We guessed the prey item to be some type of native rat species. Our guides (nor us) had never seen a weasel, so we knew we were lucky to witness the scene with photo evidence as well. We ended the birding part of the day by discovering eight male Painted Buntings in the garden feeding on sumac seed heads, while Rough-winged Swallows and Social Flycatchers caught insects on the wing.

Mon., Jan. 17 Finca Chichavac in Tecpan | Antigua Guatemala

After birding during breakfast as we sat on the outdoor deck overlooking Lake Atitlan, we departed Hotel Toliman and traveled towards our next destination, Antigua Guatemala. We stopped in route at Finca Chichavac, located in Tecpan. Finca Chichavac is in the mountain forest biome of Sierra de Tecpan, 30 miles from Antigua Guatemala at an altitude of 8200 feet. Finca Chichavac's pine-oak forest hosted some not yet seen species and we started our day with an Acorn Woodpecker as we waited our turn at the banos. Flycatchers were abundant



there and we had beautiful scope looks at Silky Flycatcher, Hammonds Flycatcher, Tufted Flycatcher, and Buff-breasted Flycatcher. A few more new birds that made a first trip appearance were Brown Creeper, a pair of Eastern Bluebirds, and a Yellow-eyed Junco. After lunch at the infamous Restaurante Rincon Suizo (steak tacos!) in Tecpan, we birded the forest behind the restaurant and added great looks at Mountain Trogon and Blue-throated Motmot. A Pink-headed Warbler was observed in a small feeding flock along with Crescent-chested, Wilson's and Townsend's Warblers. Our local guide perfectly imitated a Guatemalan Pygmy-Owl and they serenaded each other until we got quick looks at the diminutive owl in flight. We then drove to our new home in Antigua, the beautiful Hotel Posada de Don Rodrigo. We had some free time to freshen up and take a stroll through this historic city. Dinner at the hotel was a delicious choice of fresh vegetable pasta or chile relleno Guatemala style while we listened to the 4-man marimba band play local favorites.

Tues., Jan. 18

Finca El Pilar | Antigua walking tour

After breakfast at our hotel, we drove the cobblestone streets of Antigua Guatemala to Finca El Pilar. This site features a mixture of shade-grown coffee plantations and oak-pine forest with patches of good bird habitat. Luckily our van was able to make it up the windy elevated dirt road to the parking lot near the peak. Once there, oh my, what a view! The volcanoes Agua, Fuego, and Acatenango were all in sight, with Fuego rumbling and erupting ash and smoke ever 7-20 minutes. But we were also here for the birds and once again they did not disappoint us. We saw some repeat regional highland endemics such as Black-capped Swallow, Bushy-crested Jay, Rufous-collared Robin, and heard Blue-and-white Mockingbird. Some new birds were also counted such as a singing Squirrel Cuckoo offering us a fantastic, perched look, and White-throated Swift, Plumbeous Vireo, a pair of Olive Warblers, and a surprising Golden-cheeked Warbler. Our guide played the call of the Singing Quail and a male responded by peeking out of the forest edge. Later, as we were driving down the road a flock of 4 quails crossed right in front of us! At another part of the Finca, the hummingbird feeders attracted numerous species such as Rufous Sabrewing (at least 3 perched very near us), Azure-crowned Hummingbird, Berylline Hummingbird, and Rivoli's Hummingbird. We then headed back to Antigua for a delicious lunch at La Calle de la Fonda. After lunch we did a walking tour of the historic city and former capital of Guatemala and visited several of



the city's ancient monasteries and restored churches. We then enjoyed an Antigua farewell dinner of fresh Mahi Mahi at Restuarante Welten and reviewed our bird list which was now over 230 species with one more day of birding to go.

Wed., Jan. 19 Cerro De la Cruz | Jardines de Provenza | Guatemala City

Sadly, we packed our bags this morning after breakfast at the hotel as it was our last full day of the tour. We departed the lovely historic city of Antigua Guatemala and made a quick stop at Cerro De la Cruz, a local park overlooking Guatemala City with an amazing view of the Agua volcano. We were hoping for a few new birds to add to our list and were pleasantly surprised that our first bird was new, a beautiful male Grace's Warbler. Roland played a recording of Ferruginous Owls calling and soon a mixed flock of warblers, vireos and Black-capped Siskins flew close by. We added 4 more Grace's Warblers, and several Nashville & Townsend's Warblers, Blue-headed Vireos, and Indigo Buntings. Our next stop was Jardines de Provenza, a wonderful field of the largest lavender garden in the country, located just 10 minutes from Antigua Guatemala. It is a private reserve with a trail surrounded by a mixed forest within a mountainous system that is part of the Central Volcanic Chain of Guatemala. We birded a bit on the trails below the restaurant and lavender fields and Roland successfully called in some Blue-and-white-Mockingbirds, with most of us getting quick looks at these elusive birds. We had a margherita pizza lunch on the patio deck with incredible views of the majestic volcanoes of Agua, Fuego and



Acatenango. Fuego is the only active one of the three and it erupted multiple times during lunch sending clouds of smoke and ash into a clear blue sky while we were there. We had time for one more quick stop somewhere in the city before checking into our hotel, so we visited a park called Mapa en Relieve de Guatemala, or the Relief Map of Guatemala. Mape en Reileve is a huge 3D physical map of Guatemala covering approximately 1,800 square meters built at a scale of 1:10,000. The map was built in 1905 without the aid of modern technology, such as satellite mapping, which makes the map even more impressive. Its creators, lieutenant colonel and engineer Francisco Vela and engineer Claudio Urrutia, spent 15 years traveling around Guatemala on the back of donkeys measuring the highs and lows of the country. Vela and Urrutia mapped Guatemala's mountains, volcanoes, valleys, basins, rivers, lakes, coasts, ports, as well as countless cities and towns and their roads and railways. It took 18 months to transform the wealth of data collected into a vast topographical map made of concrete. It is likely the largest terrain model ever created and has since been restored and refurbished. Back at the Hotel Clarion in Guatemala City we did our final bird list of the trip over a cold beer, ending up with an impressive 238 species, and wished our guide Roland a happy birthday. We had a final dinner at the hotel, and we all bid farewell to each other with lots of fond memories.

Thurs., Jan. 20 Departures

Our tour ended today, and we all departed Guatemala back to our homes in New Jersey, California, Honduras, and Arizona. The people of Guatemala were wonderful, interesting, kind, with a culture steeped in the history of many civilizations and races. I know I am looking forward to the next trip there already.

Group Photo (Rick Weiman - RW), Mountain View (RW), Breakfast (RW), Wine-throated Hummingbird (RW), White-eared Ground Sparrow (James P. Smith - JPS), Black Phoebe (Hugh Simmons), Yellow-throated Euphonia (Carlos Sanchez), Clay-colored Thrush (Doug Greenberg), Bat Falcon, (Neotropical River Otter (Daniel Siminski - DS), Blue-gray Tanagers (Greg Smith), Long-billed Starthroat (Glenn Chambliss), Crested Guan (Sandy Sorkin), Deer (DS), Scenic (DS), Group Photo (RW), Violet Sabrewing (Rebecca Steinmann), Scenic Lunch (RW), Antigua (RW), Social Flycatcher (Ted Beedy), Colorful Clothes (DS), Volcano (RW), Cerro Group (RW), Pong (RW), Los Tarrales Pond (RW)