

# Mexico Birds & Butterflies | Trip Report

## Feb. 13 – 20, 2022 | by Peg Abbott



**With guide, Peg Abbott and participants Brian, Cindy, George, Joe, Judy, Kerwin, Peggie, Rick, Ronald, and Susan.**



### **Sun., Feb. 13**

#### **Welcome to Mexico!**

Our arrival into Mexico City went smoothly, especially because the hotel we started at was a simple walk or shuttle ride from either terminal. Part of the group came in early to tour the city and had fun finding art and tasting great food. We enjoyed meeting each other and hearing plans from Carlos for our week ahead. We knew we had a full day tomorrow, so we turned in early to rest up for our grand adventure.

### **Mon., Feb. 14**

#### **La Cima Park | Sierra Madre Specialties | Lerma Marshes**

We left very early to avoid the train in Mexico City. Heading west the highway started to climb and we watched the sunrise glow over one of the big volcanos. Our first stop was at an extensive recreational park with trails at La Cima. Here, an old railway route has been converted to a bike trail and we walked it in the fresh air of dawn as sunlight was just barely touching the trees. Our first official bird was a Mexican Stiped Sparrow, a noisy and social species with a striped head and back. We saw several and they posed nicely on rocks, especially as sun glow warmed them. Next, were Red Crossbill and Yellow-rumped Warbler, familiar species to us in the USA but very much at home in here the Mexican white pines growing in stately form. Yellow-eyed Junco and the Olive-backed form of Spotted Towhee suggested we were in the Sierra Madres. In the distance Greater Pewee sang "Jose Maria" and two much-desired but elusive Long-tailed Quail commanded our attention as they called loudly, but sigh, we marked them as heard only. Breakfast time! Basilio had put out a feast! Fresh fruits, yoghurts, breads, cereals and hard-boiled eggs. Hot coffee in the brisk morning air was also divine, truly a



birder's field breakfast galore. Now well fortified, we set off to see one of Mexico's rarest endemics, the Sierra Madre Sparrow. It is a lover open bunchgrass habitat and management by the local ejido (community) helps support this vulnerable species by protecting habitat from grazing, fire and agriculture. Indeed, two gentlemen from the ejido were assigned to follow us, friendly and watchful, at times helping carry the scopes. We had success! We found a flock feeding and sunning themselves in tall, thick bunchgrasses at the bottom of a slope. Carlos counted ten in total. We also found Rufous-capped Brunch Finch, a pair of this endemic species feeding on small fruits as we headed further into the valley. After finding the sparrows we walked uphill, our hikers going up to a viewpoint while the birders ambled. At 9500 feet bird stops were kind to us, allowing us to pace our breathing! We had a nice visit by Mexican Chickadee and cracking views of another endemic, a pair of Olive-striped Brush Finch. This duo stayed low, close to the ground in the brush, so we got fine views. Our hikers added Gray-Silky Flycatcher and Cinnamon-breasted Flowerpiercer to our growing list.

All this by 10:30 am on the first day! Satisfied, we drove on for an hour or so, stopping at a local cafe where Carlos had ordered a mix of quesadillas for us – chicken, squash blossom, mushroom and cheese on homemade blue corn tortillas. Yum! We also had a choice of hot soup. A few naps on the bus ensued. Our afternoon stop was at the Lerma Marshes. We walked out a raised dike on which fishing boats lay inverted. We found Sora, Coot, Mexican Duck, Red-winged Blackbird, various swallows and a Blue Grosbeak. But the showstopper was another endemic, the Black-poll'd Yellowthroat. We found several, though all shy, we eventually got decent





looks and difficult photos. Male and female. Sweet! Back in the sprinter, we completed our longest drive of the trip, but were rewarded by spending three nights at the lovely Hotel Aguablanca in Jungapeo. Rick brought us all dark chocolate candy hearts to mark the day – sweethearts all around!

## **Tues., Feb. 15                      Sierra Chincua Monarch Butterfly Reserve**

Our tours often contain one highlight after another, and this one was no exception. A day of indelible beauty and awe as we witnessed seeing tens of thousands of Monarchs in their glorious realm of Oyamel (Sacred) Fir trees. Our day started at dawn, where Basilio was ready for us with breakfast out by the van. Molly, the hotel dog, was there to send us off, joining our circle in the parking lot. We drove about an hour up to a small village, and we stopped first in an open meadow within the reserve just shy of the point at which we would start our hikes. Carlos was keen to get us on the endemic Red Warbler, and any other bird specialties of the higher elevation. It was also good to acclimate to elevation before our hike. We got out of the bus at 10,300 feet, where it was brisk, and the forest was still in shadow. We were able to see Pygmy Nuthatch, a Cassin's Vireo, and a flock of Golden-crowned Kinglets. Finally, the star of the show came in and we had fine views of Red Warbler quite close to us.

We continued to the site where we would pay our fees to the butterfly reserve and get organized to hike or ride up the mountain and peered at a map showing us the network of protected areas for the butterflies. Many surrounding villages depend on tourism for their livelihoods, which helps maintain the reserves. There are myriad pressures on these precious forests from the fast-growing avocado industry to illegal forestry, all worrisome. But today was a day to see celebrate what three countries have cooperated to create, Mexico, Canada and the USA - all connected to support and sustain all parts of the amazing migration of Monarchs;





Conservation for a small-winged creature that has the longest insect migration in the world. The flags of three nations fly at the place we started, five of our group on horseback and the rest walking a separate trail. The trail was not as steep as we had thought it would be and we enjoyed very much time in the forest to bird. There was an understory of flowering shrubs, and we were able to get close views of White-eared, Broad-billed and Rivoli's hummingbirds. We also heard and saw Steller's Jay and Red Crossbill. A little over a mile in we begin to see monarchs down sipping nectar from several flowers, and times covering the leaves of small shrubs is the best in the sun. The two days before our visit were unusually cold, and the butterflies had barely left their trees. And our glorious day, they were flying everywhere, filling the forest with bursts of flight that inspired us with joy. Almost two years into a global pandemic, that emotion felt all the more precious. The trail started to climb a bit and then we stopped short not to catch our breath, but to understand what was before us. We had reached the roosting trees that were completely cloaked with orange wings. How does one describe the sight of stately 100+ft. fir trees? Beautiful, but now seasonally adorned by such additional color and beauty. Signs on the trail asked for silence, and among the refuge of *Abies religiosa* we stood humbled by the enormity of this migration. Multiple generations pressing against such odds to make it here. And we were there! Somehow, we shared a ferocity of intention paralleled with these tiny Monarchs. Yet they outnumbered us beyond measure in scale, and they had no airplanes to get there. We were lucky to be here without crowds. Yes, there were locals, but it was not at all crowded and we could stand and gawk to our heart's content. We all felt humbled, thankful and happy. We birded our way out for at this elevation no one was moving fast. Any excuse to stop and admire something gave us pause to breathe in the atmosphere. Peg and Rich were photographing some flowers when distinctive calls alerted Peg – yeah – there were distant but distinct in call, Transvolanic Jays, an endemic species like Mexican Jays that are found at lower elevations. Lunch was at the colorful village of Ancangago in a nice cafe across the street that dated from the late 1700's. This was a memorable meal with two kinds of delicious mole. We walked around town a bit, then headed down to a roadside quarry pond where we enjoyed a bird blast at



day's end. Belted Kingfisher, Western Tanager, Cinnamon-rumped Seedeater were among the highlights. Back to the lodge, dinner, and in the adjacent quiet room, our checklist. A very rewarding day!

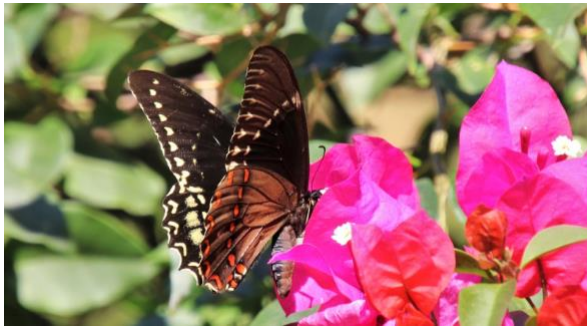
### **Wed., Feb. 16                      Macheros | Mountain Birding**

We decided to explore the Monarch Reserve, Cerro Pelon and were rewarded with some super birding, myriad flowers and other than Monarch butterflies and a great roadside picnic as well. We started out at roadside crossroads, walking through an open meadow as morning sun started to warm us. There were so many species it got wild, Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Flame-colored Tanager, saw Streak-backed Oriole and cracking views of one of the favorite species of the trip, Chestnut-sided Shrike Vireo, a hard-to-find regional specialty. We had good looks at a mix of warblers, Brown Creeper and White-striped Woodcreeper. Time passed quickly but all in all it was one of our best birding mornings. We continued to the village of Macheros where signs for Monarchs were common. A nice walk led us to find a few more species and we then returned to the hotel for a break. Light was lovely in the late afternoon when we headed out again, this time just on the hotel grounds. We descended several layers by climbing stairs - the first tier gave us a fine view of the river, the second showed off the interesting geology with cave-like features and some went further down yet to the river edge where they were rewarded by fine views of a family of American Dipper. Drinks on the patio were a welcome treat. Up we climbed for dinner, and our tally of the day's sightings.

### **Thurs., Feb. 17                      Rio Tuxpan | Tropical Dry Forest**

We wanted time to bird and explore the Tropical dry forest, just outside our door. The hotel Aguablanca sits above the lush green corridor of the Río Tuxpan. This extensive riparian corridor creates an oasis between arid slopes decorated with cactus and stately but in this season, bare – tropical dry forest trees. With rugged volcanic cliffs in the near and far landscapes, we walked through some spectacular vistas. We started next to an orchard, George quizzed Basilio as to their type and he identified them as plum trees. Carlos got busy starting up his Pygmy Owl “orchestra” and soon birds responded. We saw Dusky Hummingbird, a Mexican endemic new for us among the more common Broad-billed and Violet-crowned. A Plain-capped Starthroat put on a ridiculously great





model session atop a bare tree, as if posing for the group's inspection. In came a trio of Black-chested Sparrows, a snazzy patterned Mexican endemic. At one point they lined up all three on a branch a Joe exclaimed, "that would be a shot". We added Sharp-shinned Hawk, American Kestrel and Broad-winged Hawk to our growing list of raptors. Carlos was clever to get us a ride up the long hill, so it was quite pleasant walking down, scoping such beauties as Varied Bunting and Golden-cheeked Woodpecker. The Golden-cheeked glowed in the sun while perched on its favorite nest structure, a tall columnar cactus. Peg had fun trying out the plant app, "Seek" to identify several of the morning glories in bloom. Brian spied a Lesser Roadrunner in the road and called out, most of us got views in flight. Peg pushed up a pair of Rusty-crowned Ground Sparrow and gathered all for good views below us. The morning passed quickly, we eventually loaded up to go down to a bridge where we had a fine view of a rushing stream. Two American Dippers were a nice find as only some of the group had scrambled down to the river by the hotel earlier to find them. They bobbed on rocks in iconic fashion, then chased each other up and downstream. Black Phoebe was also there. We called for a Russet-crowned Motmot and got no response, as Basilio diligently scanned a bit farther up the road. He saved the day with the find of a perched bird up on the ridge line – we all wanted to see this showy bird. Carlos got the scope on it, and we could see it was missing one of its tail rackets.

We started early and stayed out much of the morning. All too soon it was back to our hotel to pack up and go. The mineral baths and pool looked mighty inviting. This afternoon was mainly a travel day. Two things broke up the westward-bound drive well. One was a scrumptious lunch where shrimp cocktails, various seafood dishes, Michoacán-style enchiladas and a vegetarian pesto-pasta made everyone's bellies grin. Fortified, we continued to a very large lake, the margins of which held many birds. We caught views of some, like Western Grebes, zipping by on the highway. We then pulled off to find a place to perch and scan. In very short order we added many water-associated birds to our growing list, from huge White Pelicans to Redhead ducks and tiny Least Sandpipers. A pair of Ladderback Woodpeckers and several Inca Dove were cooperative on shore as well. We



landed in just a delightful hotel, the Posada Yolihuani at Patzcuaro. After settling in we walked down to the historic part of this Pueblo Magico to enjoy dinner and get a sense of the architecture and street life.

## Fri., Feb. 18

## Birding Cerro Burro | Avocado Estate | Pueblo Magico

We woke to another sunny day, leaving at 7:15 AM to go up to Cerro Burro, a patch of forest at high elevation on a road that goes to some telecommunication towers. We had breakfast between some open pasties where we found Vesper Sparrow, Horned Lark, Cassin's Kingbird and some very bright Western Bluebirds. Basilio outdid himself with our field breakfast with artistic plates of fruit and other fare. We drove up to near the top and walked down, finding two very cooperative Golden-browed Warblers below the road in shrubbery. Seeing Red Warbler again was a treat but a Northern (Montane) Pygmy Owl coming up to check out Carlos' calling stole the show. Nice scope views for all. We drove quite a way to a fancy avocado estate for lunch in a small cozy dining area with open windows to a garden and wonderful air flow. We started with guacamole, enjoyed avocado salad, choice of entrees including shrimp, enchiladas and for Carlos a stew with nopales, chiles and chicken. For dessert? Avocado pie or ice-cream. Peg had her birthday today and the group surprised her with a pie and candles. She might have had a hint when the waitress backed off lighting a fat candle - personal fireworks jumped high! Wahoo, Happy Birthday in Mexico! We returned in time to explore Patzcuaro, another Pueblo Magico, from our hotel just off the square. Our artisan hotel so delightful to stay at also supports local artists and textile seamstresses by selling hand-crafted clothing and bags. A little shopping frenzy ensued. Cyndy and Peggie opted to enjoy a city day at leisure in this fascinating town with so much art and history and they had great fun exploring. They walked the Plaza Grande and Plaza Chica, the latter busy as Friday holds the local agricultural market. They really enjoyed seeing local handicrafts and learning about them. Our own hotel had a wonderful mix of textiles for sale and several of the group gave in to temptations. We met back up for dinner at El Patio, where we got a table outside. With a location right on the plaza we had fun watching people, mostly





locals enjoying each other on a fine Friday night. Back to the bird list, we had two days to catch up on, and oh my, a big, luscious chocolate birthday cake! Bought from a local bakery it was too tempting to skip. We all turned in for the night very full and satisfied.

## Sat., Feb. 19

## Birding Posada Yolihuani | Lake Patzcuaro | Guadalajara

This morning's bird blast was right in the yard, with a dozen or more Nashville Warblers, a very bright Steak-backed Oriole and other species, 22 right there from the courtyard. Beryline Hummingbird was new for us, a good start to the day. Joe, our horticulturist, was eyeing the gardens with glee, so rimmed by terracotta-colored walls Patzcuaro seemed blessed with good climate at 7000 feet. They made us a good breakfast at 8, by 9 we were on our way. We drove just a short way to a viewpoint and lookout above town. Popular for dog-walkers, runners and cyclists, it was also super for birds. Right out of the bus we found Painted Redstart and male and female Hepatic Tanager. A frenzy of warblers came in, and Carlos spotted a Pygmy owl. Seeing Black-throated Gray right next to a Black-and-white Warbler was fun. A Flame-colored Tanager female came to join the flock; we then encountered the male just up the way. Acorn Woodpeckers added yet more color to the show. We had grand views of the lake and could not resist asking a local to take a group photo on this bright beautiful day. It took several hours to get to Guadalajara, along the way we stopped for a picnic lunch and some birding at a pond and marsh area. On arrival some of us walked to the square to get a taste of the vibrant streets of Tlaquepaque, the charming area of Guadalajara we were staying at. Sculpture, restaurants, shops and street life was all there in profusion. But birding never stops, there was a Great Kiskadee, new for the trip, seen in the square. We went down the street to a wonderful restaurant, Zaguan, where we enjoyed drinks in honor of Peggie's birthday and some really good food. We had certainly lucked out on this one.

## Sun., Feb. 20

## Hotel Courtyard Breakfast / Departures

Inca Doves ate crumbs at our feet and a Tropical Kingbird bid us adieu. Our adventure had some to an end and our flock dispersed today, many going back to winter. A few stayed on to explore the city and enjoy Tlaquepaque in more detail. Its always tough to say good-bye to good times, good company and good times. Until the next adventure!

*Photo Credits: Group Photo (K Fulton - FK), Sierra Madre Sparrow (PA), Striped Sparrow (Peg Abbott - PA), Scenic (PA), Black-poll'd Yellowthroat (PA), Peg Scenic (PA), Butterflies (Rick Burian - RB), Floral (RB), Monarch (PA), Monarch sign (PA), Horseback (PA), Scenic in the city (PA), Donkey (RB), Plain-capped Starthroat (PA), Group Lunch (PA), Butterfly (RB), Rusty-crowned Ground Sparrow (PA), Colima Swallowtail (RB), Floral Crosses (RB), Northern Pygmy Owl (PA), Lunch (PA), Hepatic Tanager (PA), Townsend's Warbler (PA), Black-throated Gray Warbler (PA), Street Art (RB), Texan Crescent (RB), Guava Skipper (RB), Done Building (PA), Guava Skipper (RB), City Scenic (PA)*