

# Oaxaca Valley: Birds, Culture & Crafts | Trip Report | Oct. 17-28, 2022 | by Michael Marsden



**With guides Eric Martinez and Michael Marsden, and participants: Carol, Craig, Dawn, Donna, Husam, Linda, Mark, Monique, Philip, and Steven.**



## **Monday, October 17 Arrivals**

We gathered together as a group for the first time at our hotel, the Mission de los Angeles, at a dinner of delicious Oaxacan specialties, with Eric, our expert birding guide, and Ramon, who was to drive us so proficiently during our travels in the coming days. The hotel was ideally situated close to the center of Oaxaca City, with its breathtaking colonial architecture and bustling Zocalo and plazas, and yet in a tranquil setting with extensive landscaped grounds. Earlier that afternoon, some of us had had the chance to bird the grounds. There were Black Phoebes and Bronzed Cowbirds, familiar to us from home as many of us lived in or had visited SE Arizona, but the Beryline Hummingbirds and White-throated Towhees were endemic to Mexico, and a pair of elegant Gray Silky Flycatchers in trees by the swimming pool removed any doubts that we were indeed in the tropics.

## **Tuesday, October 18 Yagul**

After an early breakfast, we headed out northeast along route 175 to Ixtepeji and our eventual destination of the pine-oak forests of Cerro Felipe at an altitude of 9,000 feet, an area known to birders as La Cumbre, literally "The Summit." The morning mists soon cleared giving us clear views of everything around us. The habitat was not that dissimilar from montane SE Arizona, so it was not a surprise to come across Steller's Jays, Yellow-eyed



Juncos, Hairy Woodpeckers and a couple of familiar warblers, Hermit and Townsend's, here on their wintering grounds. But it was the special birds of the area that we were particularly seeking, and that Eric so expertly led us to, not only the widely distributed Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, Slate-throated Redstart, Brown-backed Solitaire and Pine Flycatcher, but also the endemic Russet-Nightingale Thrush, Collared Towhee, Rufous-capped Brush-Finch and (with cracking scope views) a colorful Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo. Best of all were two other endemics, both much sought after by visiting birders: the exquisite Red Warbler and the often elusive Dwarf Jay. The latter were with a flock of over 20 Gray-barred Wrens (yet another endemic) feeding in the trees around us and whose arrival had been heralded by the raucous calls by a couple of accompanying Steller's Jays.

After lunch at El Colibri, where we did see a male Blue-throated Mountain Gem(!), we drove to the archaeological site of Yagul, a Zapotec cultural center that rose to prominence after the decline of Monte Alban around 800CE. While not on the same scale as Monte Alban, the ruins here are still impressive, including residential housing, a restored ball-court (the largest in the Oaxaca Valley) and a central altar surrounded by four grassy mounds. Some of us, following in the footsteps of Oliver Sacks and countless others, gingerly descended into one the mounds that had been excavated to view the chilly, dank stone-walled tomb below. The desert grasslands around Yagul had lots of thorny shrubs and columnar cacti, ideal habitat for the endemic Gray-breasted Woodpecker, which we eventually saw well. Another endemic, Cinnamon-rumped Seedeater, happily shared the same habitat. Violet-green and Northern Rough-winged Swallows flew above us, as did a trio of raptors: Peregrine Falcon, American Kestrel and a dark-morph Red-tailed Hawk. Other species included Vermilion Flycatcher, Social Flycatcher, Curve-billed Thrasher, our only Northern Mockingbird of the tour and, memorably, a prancing Rock Wren showing off on the top of one of the ancient walls.

## **Wednesday, October 19**

## **Teotitlan | Benito Juarez National Forest**

Another excellent breakfast and another early start, this time headed east to Teotitlan del Valle, the birthplace of the renowned and flourishing Zopatec wool-weaving tradition, as well as that of its renowned birding guide, Eric Martinez!

But our initial quarry was avian, so we drove through the town to our first stop in the arid grasslands by the Piedra Azul reservoir where we came across a dazzling variety of birds. On the reservoir, one of the few freshwater wetlands in Oaxaca, were Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Blue-winged Teal, Least Grebe and American Coot, while Black Phoebe, Spotted Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, Killdeer and Great, Snowy & Little Blue Herons could be seen on its banks. There were Vermilion Flycatchers, Blue Grosbeaks, Rufous-capped





Warblers, Western Tanagers, Scrub Euphonias and both Black-vented and Bullock's Orioles in the surrounding bushes and grasslands, as well as three new endemics: Blue Mockingbird, Bridled Sparrow and Oaxaca Sparrow.

A little higher in oak-scrub woodland, the road was edged with blooming, nectar-rich plants hosting a plethora of hummingbirds – mainly Ruby-throated, but including Dusky and White-eared. Our only Elegant Euphonia and Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush of the tour were also along this part of the road.

As we ascended higher into the Benito Juarez National Forest, with breathtaking views of the Oaxaca Valley below us, we came across such typically montane species as Red Crossbill, Spotted Towhee and Greater Pewee. Our delicious lunch of traditional Oaxacan food was at the delightful Rancho Zapata in San Pablo Villa de Mitla, happily also the home of Mezcal Beneva. As well as the outstanding food, some of us were tempted by a mini-tasting at the mezcaleria, while Steve took a turn at rolling the tahona: the stone wheel weighing several tons used to crush the roasted mezcal hearts (and more usually powered by one of the Rancho's horses!). There was also a birding bonus here in the delightful form of a Beautiful Hummingbird, yet another regional endemic.

After lunch we returned to Teotitlan where we hoped to visit the workshop of the acclaimed Zapotec rug-maker, Bulmaro Perez Mendoza. Unhappily though, his premises were closed, but Eric (who knows everyone here) was able to arrange a visit instead to El Tono de la Cochinilla, weavers equally committed to the sole use of natural dyes in their work. There we had a delightful and enlightening demonstration of the intricacies of traditional weaving, some particularly fine examples of which were purchased by our group.

## Thursday, October 20                      Road to Arroyo Guacamaya

We headed northwest this morning along Highway 190 to bird the road to Arroyo Guacamaya. The weather was wonderfully cool and bright as we drove through a beautiful, wooded canyon to an altitude of 7,000 feet or so. There were lots of birds including three new regional endemics: the striking Ocellated Thrasher (scope views!), Boucard's Wren and a Lesser Roadrunner seen by Mark and Craig. On our first stops we came across MacGillivray's Warblers, Rivoli's Hummingbird, our only Rufous-crowned Sparrow (at the very southern edge of its natural range), a flock of Red Crossbills, Streak-backed and Black-vented Orioles, Gray Silky-Flycatchers and a couple of Bushtits found by Donna. Birds at higher elevations included Mexican Violetear, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks; Least, Hammond's and Dusky-capped Flycatchers, both Cassin's and Plumbeous Vireos, Painted Redstart and a flock of some 15 Band-tailed Pigeons. For Eric, though, the highlight of the morning was an



overhead flock of swifts. They were, as expected, predominantly Chestnut-collared Swifts, but Eric managed to pick out a very uncommon Black Swift and, best of all, a couple of rare Great Swallow-tailed Swifts.

After an activity-filled morning, we returned for lunch to our hotel, followed by a free afternoon to relax by the pool or explore Oaxaca City. We concluded with a wonderful dinner at the fun-named La Quince Letras.

## **Friday, October 21                      Monte Alban | Puesta del Sol**

This was to be our morning to visit the Zapotec ruins of Monte Alban. Unhappily though, we arrived to find the entrance gates not only closed, but guarded by a formidable woman determined to keep us out at all costs. She was later joined by some of her colleagues and we gradually understood that they were staging a strike to protest their working conditions. When we heard that these apparently included not having been paid for several months, it was difficult not to sympathize with them. By that time, though, there were lines of frustrated vans, buses and trucks outside the gate so that was not perhaps a universal sentiment.

Fortunately, the birding along trails on our side of the gate was known to be excellent so, when it became clear that the site would be closed for the morning, we were content to make do with that. And it did prove productive with several new birds for the trip – Thick-billed Kingbird, Greenish Elaenia and Dusky Flycatcher, as well as more views of the prized Blue Mockingbird and, for Monique, a wished-for Rufous-capped Warbler. But that left the rest of the morning. The consensus was that we should return to Oaxaca City to view the treasures of Monte Alban and other pre-Hispanic sites displayed at the Centro Cultural Santo Domingo. But circumstances for a second time militated against us – when we arrived, the entrance doors were again, and for no obvious reason, closed to us. Happily, Oaxaca is a city of unending delights, so the opportunity of more time to explore it was welcome.

After lunch we checked out of the Mision de los Angeles and began the long scenic drive south on Highway 175 to the mountain village of San Jose del Pacifico, stopping briefly at Puesta del Sol, where we were to stay for the next two nights. Dinner that evening was at the famed La Taberna de los Duendes with its signature pasta served in a wonderfully rustic setting. We arrived back at Puesta del Sol just before dusk to be greeted by a gorgeous Garnet-throated Hummingbird, whose multicolored rose, violet, green and rufous plumage glowed warmly even in the poor light. By then it was getting chilly and we were grateful for the fireplace and supply of wood in each of our cabins.





## **Saturday, October 22**

## **San Jose del Pacifico | Hummingbirds Galore!**

A relaxed day in and around Puesta del Sol and San Jose. The extensive grounds at Puesta del Sol were on the slope of a wooded hillside, with each of the cabins imaginatively situated so it was shielded from the others by trees and bushes and yet had its own vista of the valley below and the evening sunsets. The place was full of birds! On the ground and in the low bushes surrounding the cabins could be seen Yellow-eyed Juncos, White-throated Thrushes, American Robins, Russet Nightingale-Thrushes, White-throated Towhees, Slate-throated Redstarts and Crescent-chested Warblers, while the endemic Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer and Common Chlorospingus, could be seen among the flowering plants. In the trees above were Brown-backed Solitaires, Gray-Silky Flycatchers, Pine Flycatchers, Steller's Jays, Red Warblers and four new species for the trip: Mountain Trogon, Brown Creeper, Mexican Chickadee and the endemic White-throated Jay. Monique also saw a Spotted Towhee and Hassam found a White-breasted Nuthatch while Donna came across a Mottled Owl.

But arguably the best birding was at and around the hummingbird feeders. The Garnet-throated Hummingbirds were so handsome that they had to take pride of place, but we also saw Mexican Violetear, Amethyst-throated, Rufous, Rivoli's and White-eyed Hummingbirds, as well as memorable scope views of three displaying Bumblebee Hummingbirds. This was yet another regional endemic, as well as having the distinction of being the smallest hummingbird outside Cuba.

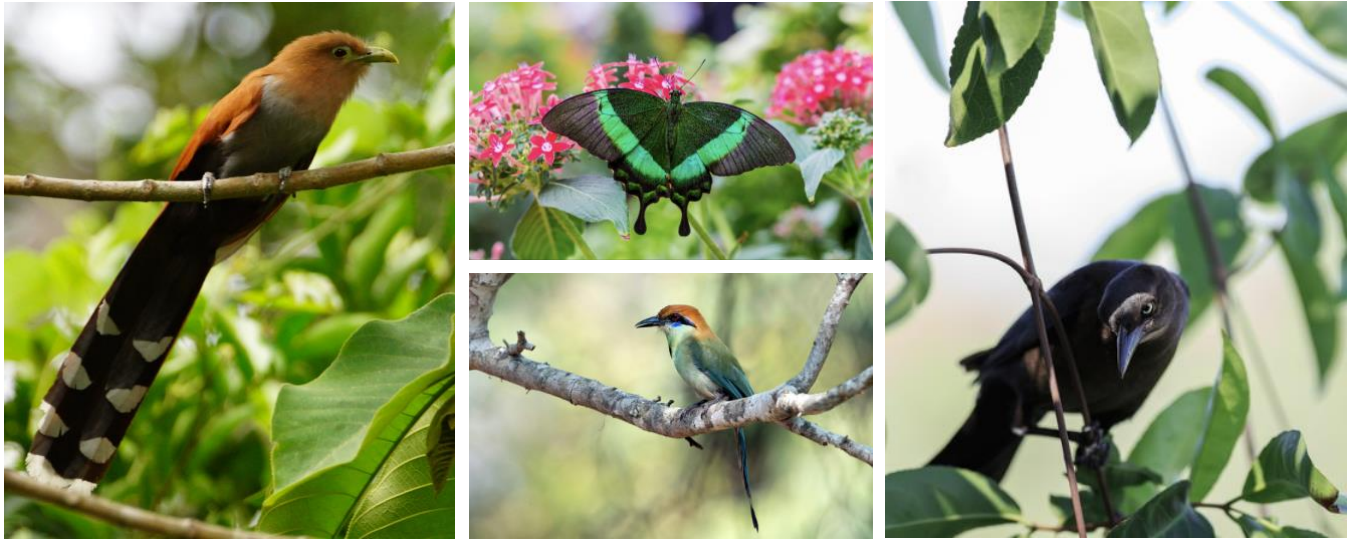
San Jose del Pacifico was a delight, even without the stimulus of its magic mushrooms, and we happily spent the late afternoon exploring its streets and shops before another enjoyable meal at La Taberna

## **Sunday, October 23**

## **Punta Jalatengo | Pluma Hildago**

We left Puesta del Sol with regret to continue our journey south to the coast. It had been noticeable at Puesta that the surrounding humid evergreen forest had a lusher, more tropical aspect, with more bromeliads and other epiphytes than those we had encountered earlier, and this became even more evident as we descended on Highway 175.

The birdlife changed as well. At Puenta Jalatengo, over the Inga River, we came across our first Golden-crowned Warbler and Red-headed Tanager, a particularly attractive endemic. And at Puenta Barranca we found a real



prize – the endemic Blue-crowned Hummingbird, the entire world population of which is restricted to the Sierra Madre del Sur. Other birds along 175 included Hook-billed Kite, Gray Hawk, Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush and Gray-breasted Wood-Wren. We exited Highway 175 heading toward Pluma Hidalgo and road conditions began to deteriorate alarmingly, with a multitude of water-logged potholes and precipitous cliffs with eroding edges – all of which our intrepid driver maneuvered around with enviable mastery!

Pluma Hidalgo is the center of coffee growing in Oaxaca, and we were fortunate to be able to have lunch at a small, family-owned finca. The coffee here is rich and full-bodied, and several of us came away with packages of their beans marketed, not inappropriately, as *Oro del Sur*. Another striking feature of the Pluma Hidalgo road was the number and variety of butterflies we saw. These included such spectacular species as Ruddy Daggerwing, Mexican Heliconia, Orange Mapwing, Banded Peacock, Anna's Eighty-eight and White Morpho. But the birds were not to be outdone! We came across our first Golden Vireo, another of the regional endemics, and had the joy of watching Northern Emerald-Toucanets while White-throated Swifts reeled above us.

As the road descended towards Huatulco, we passed through the small town of Santa Maria, where we added yet another new species to our growing list – Great-tailed Grackle!

## Monday, October 24                      Huatulco

The Hotel Villablanca, where we were to stay for four pleasant nights, is close to the center of Huatulco, a wonderfully situated coastal town that was developed by the Mexican government as recently as the 1980s specifically to be a tourist resort. It seems to have been a remarkable success, and has become an attractive place to live as well as visit.

Eric knows it well, having lived there for several years, and we spent the day visiting some of his favorite birding spots in and around the town. The first was in the Cruz de Monte area, where we saw several new birds including Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Streak-backed Oriole, Red-breasted Chat, the regional endemic Golden-cheeked Woodpecker and White-fronted Parrot. Best of all, though, were three very tropical specialties: Colima Pygmy-Owl, Citreoline Trogon and Russet-crowned Motmot, all three endemics, and the motmot surely one of the loveliest of all birds.



The second place was a little suburban corner, but it gave us killer views of Rufous-naped Wrens and, happily, more Russet-crowned Motmots. Other species here were White-lored Gnatcatcher, which proved to be common in the area, Bell's Vireo and our first and only Turquoise-crowned Hummingbirds.

A little after 10:00 a.m. we arrived at a road that cut through a wooded area close to town. By then the sun was out and it was getting hot. The conditions were ideal for raptors and, sure enough, many were taking advantage of the rising thermals. There were lots of Turkey and Black Vultures, about 30 Broad-winged Hawks, at least two Short-tailed Hawks, two Gray Hawks, a single Hook-billed Kite, a Peregrine Falcon and, most unexpectedly, three juvenile Mississippi Kites, migrants that at this late date should have been well south of us. A Collared Forest-Falcon called in the distance. Other birds included our first Lineated Woodpeckers and Groove-billed Anis of the trip, a Thick-billed Kingbird, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and Steve's Tropical Kingbird.

After lunch and some free time at our hotel, we headed out in the late afternoon to our final destination – just across the road from Huatulco's sewage treatment works! It was, of course, a modern design and thus sadly of no use to birds or birders, but it was situated in a particularly birdy part of town. Two species here that everyone wanted to see were the spectacular White-throated Magpie-Jays and the endemic West Mexican Chachalaca. Others included Orange-fronted Parakeets, a trio of Orioles (Orchard, Spot-breasted and Altamira), Boat-billed Flycatchers, Red-legged Honeycreepers, at least a dozen endemic Yellow-winged Caciques and Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (with scope views).

## **Tuesday, October 25                      Lunch with a View**

A morning spent exploring the southern half of the productive Pluma Hidalgo road. Our first stop as we ascended produced West Mexican Chachalacas and the only Red-billed Pigeon we were to see during the tour. A little higher we came across a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, a calling Masked Tityra, our only Happy Wren of the trip, and we enjoyed scope views of an Ivory-billed Woodcreeper. Mark heard a Fan-tailed Warbler calling and eventually coaxed it out into everyone's view. The rarest sighting, however, was of a Northern Barred Woodcreeper, a bird normally found well east of the Sierra Madre del Sur, but Eric explained that there was a tiny known population on this slope.

At our next stop, we came across Squirrel Cuckoos, Black-headed Saltators and a Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, all new birds for the trip, as well as the best views we'd had of Audubon's Oriole. An overhead Hook-billed Kite was a nice bonus and presaged a little flurry of raptor activity – first a magnificent, dark-morph Short-tailed Hawk soaring close above our heads, then a couple of Gray Hawks and, finally, our only Zone-tailed Hawk of the trip.





Lunch was at the impressive Finca Don Gabriel, perched high in the Sierras with breathtaking views of the valley below. It was while here that we experienced our only rainfall, but it was heavy and prolonged! Fortuitously there were plenty of places to shelter, and even hammocks for those who wished to sleep it out. The target bird here was Mexican Hermit, an endemic found only on the Pacific slope of the Sierra Madre. Erik knew its favorite feeding area, but we had to wait a long time before it deigned to show itself, and it was then almost immediately chased away by a much smaller, but clearly more aggressive, Cinnamon Hummingbird. Fortunately Mark was able to locate it again in a nearby flower bed. Other hummingbirds in the area included the endemic Beautiful Hummingbird and both Plain-capped and Long-billed Starthroats.

While driving out of the Finca we passed a feeding flock of Red-legged Honeycreepers in the trees above. But that was really the conclusion of our birding as the heavy rains had made road conditions even more treacherous than they had been, and everyone was thankful we had such a consummate driver in to get us back safely to our hotel. We happily concluded a productive day's birding with a dinner of outstanding Thai food at the Mercader restaurant in Huatulco.

## **Wednesday, October 26**

## **Pacific Pelagic Adventure**

This was the morning for our Pacific pelagic adventure. We were fortunate to have a comfortable, modern boat operated by friends of Eric (who also proved to be expert spotters of birds!) and ideal conditions, with a calm sea and good light.

There were Royal Terns and Brown Pelicans around the harbor as we set off, with a Magnificent Frigatebird high above. The continental shelf here is only some five miles out, so we were soon in deeper waters and starting to see some of our target pelagic species. The most numerous by far were Galapagos Shearwaters, with a total of about 200 in small to medium feeding flocks. These birds really do nest in the Galapagos, but disperse, seemingly year-round to feeding grounds off the Pacific coast from Panama to Jalisco. Paradoxically, they are more readily seen here than from the Ecuadorian mainland!





We only came across another 13 individual pelagics, but they comprised an astonishing nine different species. Three of them were boobies (Brown, Nazca and Blue-footed), two were storm-petrels (Black and Wedge-rumped), and there were single representatives of tropicbirds (Red-billed), shearwaters (Black-vented) and petrels (Tahiti). The last was the prize – a bird that nests in Tahiti and other islands of French Polynesia and is an extraordinarily rare visitor to Mexican waters, what British birders would call a “megatrick.” A classic instance of quality over quantity!

There were of course other birds we saw. The most fascinating were side-by-side comparisons of the look-alike Royal and Elegant Terns. Surprisingly, Franklin’s Gull was the only other larid. Most memorable were the many delightful Red-necked Phalaropes swimming in the waters around the boat. Barn and Mangrove Swallows flew above us, as did a seemingly out-of-place Gray Hawk. Gray-breasted Martins greeted us as we arrived at the dock. And we did see other wildlife. The boat was accompanied from time to time by playful Pantropical Spotted Dolphins, and we came across several Olive Ridley Turtles on the sea.

After an appropriate seafood lunch, we had the rest of the afternoon to explore the beach and gift shops of Huatulco, or perhaps take advantage of our hotel’s pool and bar. Although the hotel had little landscaping, the pool area did boast an apparently resident Green Iguana, White-throated Magpie-Jays were close by, and Magnificent Frigatebirds and American White Pelicans were seen flying over.

There was a special treat in the evening. Mark took us to a wooded area just outside Huatulco, where we found ourselves surrounded by calling Mottled Owls, Pacific Screech-Owls and a Colima Pygmy-Owl. Marc was able to get us scope views not just of one of the screech-owls, but also, astonishingly, of a roosting Buff-collared Nightjar! There could hardly have been a better end to the day.

## Thursday, October 27

## Last-minute Birding | Departures

Our last morning was spent birding the west side of the Rio Copalito from Hwy 200 to close to the river mouth. For much of the time the river wasn’t in view from the trail we took, but its influence on the vegetation and birdlife we came across certainly was. It was a delightful walk, with grasslands and deciduous trees very different from any area we had yet visited.



Several of the species we came across, including Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Western Kingbirds, Willow Flycatcher and Yellow-throated Vireo, were familiar U.S. birds, here on their wintering grounds. There were also Northern Cardinals, but of a resident race with much longer crests than those we are used to. Gray and Broad-winged Hawks, Crested Caracaras and a Sharp-shinned Hawk flew over, and Donna spotted a distant Merlin.

It really was a productive area. We came across five oriole species (Orchard, Bullock's Altamira, Streak-backed and Spot-breasted), two wrens (Rufous-naped and Barred, the latter new for the trip) and, best of all, both Lineated and, with memorable scope views, Pale-billed Woodpeckers. A flock of White-fronted Parrots flew over, and Eric heard distant Lilac-crowned Parrots, but couldn't locate them. Hassam, who had demonstrated his enviable sharp eyesight throughout the trip, also saw a Stripe-headed Sparrow. On the way back for lunch at our hotel, we stopped off at an unassuming, vacant lot overgrown with grasses and marigolds. After a few minutes of wondering why we were here, a female Blue Bunting appeared to Eric's pishing, followed by a Painted Bunting and then two endemic Orange-breasted Buntings! We spent the afternoon very pleasantly walking along Huatulco's sometimes rocky beach to the mouth of the Rio Copalito. There was very little bird activity on the beach itself, Franklin's Gulls, Elegant and Royal Terns, Brown Pelicans and Neotropic Cormorants, but everything changed as we approached the estuary. There we came across roosting Black Skimmers, scores of Black-necked Stilts and an array of other shorebirds including American Avocet, Willets and Semipalmated Plovers. We found six waders – Great and Snowy Egrets, Tricolored and Little Blue Herons, both dark and white-morph Reddish Egrets and a group of spectacular Roseate Spoonbills. Best of all, though, was a Common Black-Hawk perched on the flats, which allowed us satisfyingly close views, and a fitting last species to end our wonderful trip.

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