

Oaxaca Valley: Birds, Culture & Crafts | Trip Report | August 1-9, 2022 | by Peg Abbott



With lead guide, Erik Antonio Martinez, Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys, and participants Betty, Gary, Ken, Miles, Pam, Paula, Priscilla, Reba, and Ron.



Mon., Aug. 1

Welcome to Oaxaca City!

Our most companionable group started sharing laughter and tales as they met for the welcome dinner that Eric had set up for us at the hotel. Some had arrived early to explore Oaxaca City, taking in its colors, architecture and vibrant culture, while others arrived today. Mike and Priscilla had completed two days of hiking between native villages, participating in an interesting ecotourism project that they very much enjoyed. Eric Antonio Martinez, our guide, gave a gracious welcome. Sadly Peg's flight was cancelled by the airline and she would miss the first full birding day, one of her favorite days in the mountains!

Tues., Aug. 2

Off to the Mountains! | La Cumbre | Ixtepeji | Yagul

Breakfast was early at the hotel so the group could be on its way up into the mountains. Many were from places of summer heat so today's weather was a bit of a surprise – cold and foggy. But it did not get in the way of birding, indeed one of the first birds seen was Chestnut-sided Shrike Vireo, always a good find. Other bird favorites this day were the noisy and social Gray barred Wren and the musical Brown-backed Solitaire. They



moved around at a birder's pace, getting used to the air above 9000'. The endemic Red Warbler was seen well, several times – high on everyone's hoped for list. Lower down at eye-level everyone also got good looks at Rufous-capped Warbler. A highlight later on in the morning was seeing Collared Towhee, a very showy and personable endemic. As the group continued up the road into lush pine forests. Eric heard Dwarf Jays and called out to the driver, "Stop". Everyone jumped out right into a bird explosion which included Gray-Barred Wren, about nine Dwarf Jays, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, and Hairy Woodpecker. A few had quick view of Montezuma Quail, always an elusive one, and inspired by the bird party, stayed to bird this tall pine area for a while. Lunch was enjoyed mid-day in the company of Blue-throated Mountain Gem, and both Rivoli's and White-eared Hummingbirds. Delicious hot chocolate hit the spot. Gary tried pork ribs in sauce, some tried a local mushroom specialty and others delicious hot soup. On the way back, coming out of the mountains, they stopped to see the Tule Tree, a 2000-year-old tree reminiscent of the Baobab of Africa. This huge Montezuma cypress that is a most impressive sight in the middle of the small village surrounding it.

Late afternoon they visited Yagul, a classic archeological site of the Zapotec people, known for its six interior courtyards. Sitting atop a mesa, with some dramatic geology all around, it is a very impressive site. Birding highlights here included good looks at Gray-breasted Woodpecker and Boucard's Wren. Peg arrived mid-afternoon and was happy to join the group for a casual, neighborhood meal enjoyed on an outside patio on a lovely evening. We downed tacos, nopalitas, and cold cerveza. Time for the checklist and off to bed.

Wed., Aug. 3 Teotitlan | Piedra Azul Reservoir | Local Weaving

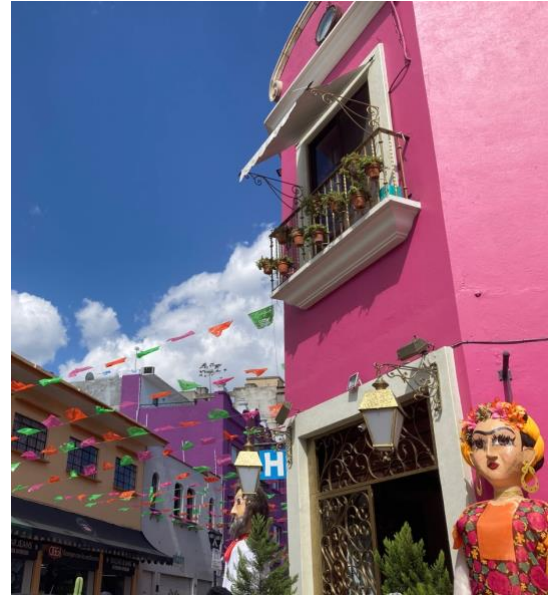
We met for breakfast and headed out early, driving to the home village of Eric, our guide. He told us a lot about the system of community government and how jobs necessary to run the town were shared and assigned. We drove past the local reservoir to start our birding but were shocked at how low the reservoir was. There has been precious little rain in the valley this past year stressing both crops and native vegetation. Compared to other years, the overall levels of bird activity were showing this stress. At our first stop, a Blue Grosbeak teed up and sang in pretty dawn light. We scoped a Greater Pewee, then heard the distinct buzzy call of endemic Bridled Sparrows. They gave us great views and were joined by White-throated Towhees, another endemic. A Canyon



Wren gave its signature descending call and popped out into view. Bird noise grew loud quickly and we soon saw the reason, an adult female and her fledgling Cooper's Hawk buzzed the shrubs and landed in a large tree. It was part of a family group, all present. Priscilla saw one of the youngsters with a snake dangling in its talons. A Red-tailed Hawk came through and the agitated Cooper's set off in pursuit. Bird drama at this site! We walked a ways, finding such beauties as Elegant Euphonia and Black-vented Orioles. A small group of Gray Silky Flycatchers was a treat in the scope. A male Rose-throated Becard and Greenish Elaenia were other good finds. The morning passed quickly! We made a stop at the reservoir and walked out on the dam for good views of our first Beryline Hummingbirds feeding on an orange-flowering mistletoe. Two Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and two family groups of Least Grebe swam below. Bright male Vermilion Flycatcher hunted for insects alongside Black Phoebe and a lone Loggerhead Shrike. In a pool of water below the dam we studied Tropical Kingbird and scoped a Green Kingfisher.

From here we went to the weaving studio of Bulmaro Perez Mondoza, a master weaver, where we watched a fascinating demonstration on spinning and dying. In the rug room he showed us several patterns their family is known for including an intricate one called Mountains and Rain. His gentle enthusiasm was compelling and several of us had a grand time picking out treasures. The tree of life pattern with birds was popular. The whole experience was one of drinking in color. The work is a cooperative of family and friends was rewarding to see - so many beautiful textiles in one place felt magical. To see and learn how they make them made it all more meaningful. Several of us went home with bundles in hand.

Eric had a place in mind for lunch, one where we could keep birding. Rancho Zapata is a former country home turned restaurant, mezcal farm and tasting room, and gardens, a roadside oasis. As if on cue, Gray-breasted Woodpecker came in to a nest hole and Dusky Hummingbird fed on tubular flowers. Two endemic bird species joining us at lunch, not bad! Food here was great. Miles tried the Tayludas, several the Chile Rellenos and a few others, mole. Reba inspired us to taste the local mezcal, smoky and delicious. Eric explained the impact on the



environment of today's crazed demand for this spirit. The distillery brand of this ranch was sustainable, with the agaves being farmed. But scrub habitat all around Oaxaca is being cleared rapidly, and rare agaves are being poached from the wild. He's seen a corresponding decline in species such as Beautiful Hummingbird in recent years. We made one more birding stop at a lovely, shaded spring area with pools. While the small dam was dry, we found near it a patch of Tropical Milkweed with Queen and Monarch Butterflies, a Tanmark and Banded Peacocks. After a short time to freshen up we enjoyed a rooftop dinner at Quince Letres. A well-loved restaurant in Oaxaca, we started with margaritas made with smoky mezcal and guacamole and some nice salad, for our vegetarians enjoyed zucchini mole and chiles Mixteca with plantains. Flan for dessert was excellent.

Thurs., Aug. 4 Las Guacamayas | Oaxaca City

We gathered early again for breakfast, some choosing hot breakfast with eggs and meats and vegetables, others going straight for the yogurt granola and fresh fruit. Today we went a different direction to some beautiful foothills of the mountains on a road to a town called Guacamayas above Etla. Quickly up the road we got out to bird at the water treatment area. Here we had good views Gray Silky Flycatcher and a pair of Hepatic Tanager. A Golden Vireo came out and posed on a line of shrubs. We then made a stop fairly soon to start hunting for birds of the scrub. Almost immediately out of car, we heard a familiar sound, especially to Gary and Peg from Tucson - the trilling call of Botteri's Sparrow. We got a good look, and it was fun to see this bird in new terrain, alongside also familiar Cassin's Kingbird, and Blue Grosbeak. A bit further up the road we heard the call of the endemic Oaxaca Sparrow, often hard to find. In August they are breeding and vocal, so a bit easier to find than other times of the year. We found a skulky one time and it came out in the open and we all got good views.

From this stop, we kept going up the mountains. Slaty Vireo teased us with constant calling. We tried and tried but found no Ocellated Thrasher (yet). We crossed a flowing stream and pursued a calling Mountain Trogon. It was a pair and we got glimpses as they were flying between feeding and some dense Woodland. A few lucky ones at the start saw the colorful male of this species cross the road. As we were searching for the trogon Eric called us off it because he had in sight a more difficult to find species, a Gray-collared Becard, which had come in with a small mixed flock and stayed. It put on quite a show, rising up and down on the branch on full alert. We had great looks! We also heard Elegant Trogon barking away and guessed the hillside must have abundant fruit. We were at an elevation zone that the two trogon species overlapped. We called it quits earlier today, as we wanted to let those in our group who wanted to enjoy some free time in Oaxaca City, so we headed back to the



hotel and had a patio lunch there quite pleasantly in the shade. We headed into town at 3:45 and turned everyone loose. Some went and had a beer or coffee and watched people go by, others did some diligent shopping and Reba and Pam decided to have dessert first (after all this was a vacation!) followed by fun shopping for gifts. Paula scored some cute kid's clothes and things she had been looking for. We all met in the glow of late afternoon by the impressive Santa Domingo Church, shone at this time with a rich golden color. From here we walked together to our restaurant, again gaining a prime seating on the rooftop, and we made the meal a festive time. Ron led the way for us to try some particularly decadent margaritas. Eric recharged his energies with a big tender steak. Peg tried the duck in an Pipian Molé, a few others tried Chile Rellenos and Rob chose a fresh fish dish. Oh, and did I mention the chocolate mousse some selected for a scrumptious dessert...

Fri., Aug. 5 Morning at Monte Alban | Drive to San Jose del Pacifico

We started early again as we had several locations we wanted to stop this morning as we headed toward the famous Zapotec ruins at Monte Alban. We first birded a road across from there, which was strangely quiet so we did not linger long. Rufous-capped Warbler put on a good show and it was nice to see locals out walking or jogging for exercise. A Rufous-collared Sparrow teed up for views. At the ruins we got an overview from Eric and then split into two groups. Peg and a few admired the huge plaza and its intricate structures - what we looked down on was the political and ceremonial center of this culture. Eric led a loop walk down among the structures, each major one also had signs to explain its construction. It was quite moving to see and feel this history. Lunch was quite special, at an artisan's gallery and restaurant, the name translated to the Zapotec Lily. We walked in to watch women making blue corn tortillas on a traditional comal which we would enjoy with guacamole at lunch. The gallery was split into a section with local clothing, and the other side wonderful wooden carved animals, or alibrijas. Hanging from the ceiling was in a rate of beautiful car hummingbirds, and on the shelves for Jaguars and owls and coatimundis and armadillos. It was local pottery, and some jewelry, and quite a few people left with treasures in a bag. From here the road climbed in elevation and we were transported to a new realm, pine forests high in the mountains! We settle right in, and enjoyed dinner together and caught up on our checklist.



Sat., Aug. 6 Birding the Mountains from San Jose del Pacifico

It was lovely to wake in the mountains, but the air was brisk and there was quite a wind at dawn. As we drove out along the spine of the Sierra Madres, we watch the pink glow start to light up tall pines that lined the road. We drove a short ways to then spend the morning walking down the road from San Mateo toward Rio Hondo, at a birder's pace. There was some local traffic, and one vehicle stopped to take our photo. We must have seemed to them like strange creatures in our birding gear. We had good at bird activity right from the start, when a family of Yellow-eyed Junco's alerted us to a mixed flock with Mexican Chickadee, Olive Warbler, Red Warbler, Crescent-chested Warbler, and Common Chlorospingus. Eric whistled an imitation of a Northern Pygmy Owl to keep the flock in close so we could all get a chance to see them. But his calling invited the real thing to come on in and soon to our delight, Eric had the scope trained in a very obliging Northern Pygmy Owl.

Our day was off to a roaring start. We next had Red Crossbill, Hutton's Vireo, and a jaunty little Tufted Flycatcher. At one point a White-eared Hummingbird sat for quite some time on the overhead phone wire, not a typical perch. But the real showstopper was seeing the endemic Bumblebee Hummingbird, a male, at first feeding in flowers, and then - invigorated by the sight of a female - going into full display. This little dynamo whistles a high pitched song and hurls himself to the sky. We watched it repeatedly going up and down in the air with its tail held up while whistling. We could catch the incredible pink light of its gorget change as it flew and we saw it from different angles. Best of all it had a couple of favorite perches and kept landing on them so we could put the scope on and study this much sought-after hummingbird in detail. While the August timing of our tour lacks the northern migrants, it's wonderful to be here when the resident species are vocalizing and active with breeding displays. Today's time with the Bumblebee was a real treat.

There were a lot of wildflowers in bloom going down the road, causing Reba, Paula and Peg to keep falling behind as they admired lobelias, lupines, lilies and penstemon. The canopy of trees was high In this forest of straight tall pines interspersed with oaks of sculptured character. There are Madrone trees with rich red bark, and lots of fruiting shrubs, something that resembled a rhododendron. Eric called out several butterflies, and



got quite excited when the Band-tailed Pigeon he thought he was training the scope on turned out to be a distant Crane Hawk, a species not typically up in the mountains. We all got good views and he taught a few of the group how to use their cell phones through the scope to capture images. We had become a working team. Gary was good about reinforcing our sightings with a post-view look at the field guide and Priscilla was good with the app. Our herd of naturalists made their way slowly down the road, taking it all in, thrilled when a pair of mountain Trogon flew in, perched for quick scope views and then flashed their colors over our heads. We turned around at a small plot of land that was absolutely stuffed with flowers and fruiting trees, well stacked firewood, a place that exuded self-reliance and sustainability. Rural Mexico can have such charm. We had great luck with the weather and nice sunshine, a perfect and very productive morning.

We came back to the hotel for lunch a little before 1 PM. Miles and Priscilla had black bean soup which was elegantly poured into their bowls which had been set up first with all the fixings. What a great way to keep the soup hot, the ingredients fresh and offer a showy presentation. Several of us had either portobello mushroom or “regular” hamburgers of giant proportion causing laughs and posing for photographs. After this we needed a break, and Eric gave us a full two hours off which was just wonderful to catch up on a few things relax a bit on our porch is, and just enjoy this beautiful place.

Some chose to continue relaxing while others set out at 4 PM to bird on the grounds. Right away we found a Bumblebee Hummingbird, right here in our garden singing and calling, feeding on flowers, and advertising from favorite perches. Two Common Raven called overhead and landed on a dead tree. We headed over to the ravine in an area where fresh fruit that’s not eaten is discarded, hoping to find some brush finches or towhees. The trail is narrow here so we went in a couple of shifts. As the first emerged group Eric came out looking quite serious and said, “I’ve just heard one of the most difficult to see species in Mexico and I think we should get to a place we have a good view and try for it.” We were off in pursuit! Up the hill we went, not too quickly as the lodge sits at 8000 feet. We stood close together at the head of the same ravine and we could hear one, possibly two White-throated Jays calling below us. Eric said they’d probably come in low, and that they could be difficult to see. We scanned a matrix of branches, had quick glimpses, and heard repeated vocalization. We decided to move off and see if they might keep an interest in us from another location. This proved useful as we got a better angle, and indeed working on it for a half an hour or so Eric was able to get every one of us a good view of the



White-throated Jay, quite an accomplishment. While we're waiting, we also got to see Red Warbler and Slate-throated Redstart. Eric declared that was probably the day's grand finale and it was time to head back to freshen up in our cozy cabins, pick up our checklists and have dinner. We started to eat outside on the patio but as the wind increased and the sun went down, it made sense to go inside. There is plenty of fresh air blowing through there but it was warmer and, as Gary commented on, we had padded seats. We were still using caution for the Covid virus in our exploring. We enjoyed our dinner quite a bit, some head steak with grilled vegetables, others had flautas in Mole Negro. We tallied up our sightings, going over some of the wonderful species we'd found, and then headed off to bed.

Shortly after we got to our rooms, there were knocks on the door and the firewood man was there to make fires in our corner fireplaces. The word was split small for crackling blaze over good solid pieces of oak which kept our rooms warm for the rest of the evening. This made for a beautiful and cozy way to end the day.

Sun., Aug. 7 Pluma Hildago | Puesto del Sol

Today we got to explore a new habitat, tropical moist montane forest with a number of deciduous trees, quite different than the pine realms we'd been in over days previous. There were so many new birds for us as we got into this new habitat it was mind-boggling. We had an early start, watching sunrise as we wound our way on the main highway which held a series of very tight curves. We got views out both directions as the roadbed followed the mountain ridgeline. Small villages along the way were bustling with activity already, setting out wares to sell and getting ready for the day. Our first stop was near a small farm with two inquisitive dogs that probably had not encountered a group of birders standing on the bridge over the river that ran by their home before. Here and at one more stop, we got cracking views of a Blue-capped Hummingbird on native flowers below the road and encountered a mixed flock with Red-legged Honeycreeper, Red-headed Tanager, Audubon's Oriole and Black-headed Siskin.



We then turned east on the road to Pluma Hildago, a quiet country road that leads to a village of that name. We could walk at leisure listening to sounds of White-tipped Dove and Happy Wren and watch the antics of a tree-full of Orange-fronted Parakeet. Two very curious Rusty Sparrow checked us out by the van. A hurricane has hit this southern side of the mountain range since our last visit, and landslides and fallen trees were impressive. We birded our way to friends of Eric's that have a small restaurant at their coffee farm. Here we had one of the best meals of our trip, served with smiles of friendship. Due to the hurricane our Sprinter could not get there so Eric had the locals ready to meet us in Tuk Tuk's – how fun is that! A Louisiana Waterthrush in the arroyo below us must have been a very early migrant. WE birded our way out the road, picking up good views of a flock of White-throated Magpie-Jay, several Golden Vireo and our first quick view of Mexican Hermit.

It was a great butterfly day as well. We saw Black-bordered Tegosa, Yellow-headed Spreadwing, Banded Peacock, Julia, Rosita's Patch, Texas Crescent, several sulphurs, a Durrantes Longwing and always impressive, a few of the brilliantly colored Morpho butterflies. Eric was so helpful with identification, crediting his daughter for making him pay attention, they sit long enough for young eyes to delight in, and he caught the spark. Italian night - how can the most wonderful pastas be served to such perfection so far up a winding mountain road in Mexico. A memorable night in the small town near our hotel and some very happy bellies as night fell.

Mon., Aug. 8 Local Birding | Return to Oaxaca City

We had to say goodbye to our lovely lodgings, but took a quick, peek in the garden where the Bumblebee Hummingbird male was feeding on Sierra Madre Lobelia and looking fine for his lady. Amethyst-throated and Garnet-throated Mountain Gems were active at the feeders. Common Ravens gave noisy calls, and a pair of Mountain Trogon put on a ridiculously wonderful show, such fine views. We worked hard for scope views of Pine Flycatcher. But the crowning moment of the morning was without doubt, Ron's find of Northern Emerald Toucanet, (subspecies waglerii) right under our noses as we looked for wrens, was just amazing. His plane of view was just different enough he found this stealth nest robber frozen along a branch, not more than 10 feet away. After everyone angled their bodies in all directions to get a glimpse, Peg could not help but pop a quick call. It came up to investigate and surrounded by lichens and beautiful vegetation it was a moment of beauty no one will forget. Thank you, Ron!



We returned to pack up, and then head into Oaxaca City. We kept watch for Crested Caracara and other species along the way, and got to our hotel in time to settle in. A few took off for a fun shopping spree in town, about eight blocks away. We had rooms closer to the main dining area this time and were appreciative of how much quieter they were than our proximity to a party crew also at the hotel on our arrival day. We headed out for a special dinner at one of Oaxaca's great restaurants, sharing our journey's highlights - what a way to end our tour. One of the highlights was our group, we had such a good time together.

Tues., Aug. 9 Departures

Birdlife was active in the blooming trees off our verandas as we packed up our way too full suitcases, having done a bit of shopping damage in Oaxaca City before that final dinner. A few birding stalwarts of the group decided they just had to try for a few elusive endemics we'd missed, and Eric chose a local Hacienda that had been subdivided but never built on. It gave us a road system to walk and in no time, we watched two Ocellated Thrashers at close range, score! As we had more time, we walked up the arroyo and found a group of West Mexican Chachalaca, up the drainage but great in scope views. Mike and Priscilla had big smiles, and we all enjoyed the "general" birds that are always so special, Beryline Hummingbird, Blue Mockingbird, Gray Silky-flycatcher and Bridled Sparrow. We got back in time to catch up to the others for our airport transfer and flights home. Another great adventure!

Group Photo (Peg Abbott - PA), Colorful Banners (Priscilla Erickson - PE), Bumblebee Hummingbird (PA), Mountain Trogon (PA), Rooster Art (PA), Ruins (PE), Cactus Over Ruins (PE), Hummingbird Mural (PE), Collared Towhee (PA), Purple Flowers (PE), Teotitlan Weaving Yarn (PA), Butterfly (PE), Poolside (PA), Group Birding (PA), Group Lunch (PA), Bridled Sparrow (PA), Native Women Weave (PE), Oaxaca Valley (PA), Pair of Hepatic Tanagers (PA), Bridled Sparrow (PA), Yellow Flowers (PE), Pink Building (PE), Ron & Gary field guide check (PA), Peg (PA), Monte Alban Ruins (PE), Welcome Birders Sign (PA), Ron & Paula (PA), Eric Antonio Martinez (PA), Pam (PA), Miles & Priscilla (PA), Reba (PA), Puesto del Sol view (PE), Gary relaxing at Puerto del Sol (PA), White-throated Jay Spotting! (PA), Waterfall (PE), Hildago Plume lunch (PA), Eric-Miles-Priscilla (PA), Yellow Flowers (PE), Purple Flowers (PE), Final Dinner (PA), Emerald Toucanet (PA), Final Morning Birding (PA)