

Mexico's Butterflies and Birds | Feb. 12 - 19, 2023 | Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



With guides, Carlos Gonzales & Dave Mehlman and participants: Beth, Brylee, Cindy, Connie, Gary, Jon, Linda, Phyllis, Terry and Tom (and driver/chef extraordinaire Basilio!)



Sun., Feb. 12

Arrival in Mexico City

Our tour group gradually assembled at the Courtyard Marriott, right at Terminal 1 of the Mexico City Airport, with several arriving one or two days early. Some ventured out to explore Mexico City in their extra time, there not being a whole lot to see right at the airport hotel! We all arrived in time for a first dinner together, along with Carlos and Basilio. After introductions, we mastered the ordering of our first restaurant meal in Mexico and then reviewed plans for the next day (an early start to beat the Mexico City traffic) and for the rest of the tour. Then off to our rooms for final organizing and getting ready for our tour adventure.



Mon., Feb. 13 La Cima | Ciénega de Lerma | Jungapeo

We began today very early with everyone assembling with their gear at the street entrance on the first floor of the hotel by about 5:30 a.m. Despite the hour, everyone understood that getting out of one of the largest cities in the Western Hemisphere in a timely fashion meant an early start. To tell the truth, most of us were lured by the promises of breakfast and coffee awaiting upon our arrival! After about an hour and 15 minutes of negotiating Mexico City traffic and climbing up into the mountains, we arrived at our destination: the La Cima station on an old railroad line which had been converted to a bike path in a “rails to trails” program. Getting out of the van for some initial birding, we realized that the temperature was around freezing, so everyone had on all their layers as we went out for a walk in this area of potato fields, bunch grasses and pine-oak forest, accompanied by two ejidatarios from the local community that owns the area. Despite (or due to?) the cold, birds were spotted right away, including large numbers of American Robins and Cedar Waxwings feasting on berries, Yellow-eyed Juncos and Striped Sparrows on the ground and in the grasses, and the local, Olive-backed variety of Spotted Towhee singing from the trees. A little more careful searching among the sparrows yielded our prize for the morning: several Sierra Madre Sparrows, a species restricted to a very small area in the mountains west of Mexico City and in Durango State. Meanwhile, occasional choruses of Long-tailed Wood-Partridges broke out from the hillsides to liven up the scene.

After this warm-up birding, the sun had risen, literally warming us up, and we returned to the van for an excellent breakfast spread of coffee, fruit, yogurt, breads and other goodies prepared by our chef and driver Basilio! We never had a field breakfast so good; all were in unanimous agreement!! Following breakfast, we took a short walk on the bike trail through open pine woods, spotting Grace’s and Olive Warblers, Mexican Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch and Violet-green Swallow. We finished up the morning birding here cresting one more hill, which proved a fortuitous choice. On our way up, Green-striped Brushfinch was found scratching away at the soil, its white throat flashing in the dark understory. Some very lovely Golden-browed Warblers, one of the most beautiful members of the resident warbler genus *Basileuterus*, showed themselves in the shrubs, while a Mexican Violetear chirped incessantly from the treetops. We heard and got brief glimpses of a Brown-backed Solitaire and, much to our amazement, a Long-tailed Wood-Partridge, apparently lured in by a recording of its call, sat very still on the ground near us for a long period of time. A life bird for all and only the second time



Carlos had never seen one! Incredible luck on this very first outing of the tour, which, interestingly enough, was still within the city limits of Mexico City. We continued on after this very satisfying outing, stopping for lunch at a roadside restaurant in the small community of La Lagunilla in the State of Mexico. Here, Carlos kindly ordered a variety of typical quesadillas from the area made with the most delicious, thin, blue corn masa that one could imagine. A great introduction to Mexico for all of us from the U.S. and Canada. After lunch, we continued to the nearby Laguna Almeyda sector of the Lerma Marshes on the outskirts of Toluca in search of wetland birds. We soon found our primary species of interest there: the Black-poll Yellowthroat. Although easy to find here, this species is restricted to the few remaining, highly threatened, wetlands of the Mexican Altiplano west of Mexico City. Other, more common, wetland birds found here included Song Sparrow, Common Gallinule, Northern Harrier, White-faced Ibis and a fairly obliging Sora. As the afternoon was getting late, we had to get going to the Hotel Agua Blanca in Jungapeo in the State of Michoacán, our final destination for the day and a three-hour drive. The views of the countryside were admirable, including that of the Nevado de Tolima volcano that dominates the landscape here. We arrived at the Agua Blanca, which lies at a considerably lower elevation than where we'd been, with enough light to admire the extensive dry forest surrounding the hotel and the adjacent canyon of the Rio Tuxpan. We then had dinner at the hotel, followed by a review of the day's checklist and plans for the next day, then enjoyed our first night at this quiet, lovely hotel surrounded by nature.

Tues., Feb. 14

Sierra Chincua Monarch Reserve | Jungapeo

We gathered for another fine outside breakfast prepped by Basilio by the van in the parking lot of the Hotel Agua Blanca, then loaded up for a full day in the field visiting one of the nearby monarch butterfly reserves. After winding our way through towns and up the mountain, we arrived at the El Llano entrance to the Sierra Chincua Monarch Reserve and took a walk around the entrance area. Despite the cold air and high elevations (over 10,500 ft), we found some great birds during our walk. The definite highlight was a pair of Red Warblers observed foraging through the trees for an extended time—an absolutely spectacular sighting and the species that was the highlight of the trip for many! Diligent searching and waiting for mixed species flocks also turned up Townsend's, Hermit, Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned Warblers; lots of Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Golden-crowned Kinglet, House Wren and a Pine Flycatcher. Finishing up our walk, we continued driving up the entrance road to the main visitor center, decorated with the flags of Mexico, Canada and the U.S. After a quick break, we put on our day packs and started on the hike into the reserve to witness one of the most amazing animal aggregations on earth. This was not an easy hike. While all insisted at the start upon walking the entire way,



many abandoned this effort either on the way up or down once its difficulty became clear. The temptation of the many horses for rent nearby proved too much to resist, although the horse ride only takes you part of the way to the actual location of the monarchs (which changes from year to year). The trek took most of the group one to two hours, depending on hiking speed and ability, but upon arrival each of us was immediately awed. Although quite a few monarchs were flying around, most of them were clinging to the fir branches and trunks (the fir here is the Oyamel, *Abies religiosa*). Our group joined many others composed of both Mexicans and foreigners, in quietly observing this spectacle of nature—much like being in a natural temple. After absorbing the scene, we began our hike back to the parking area, with some stops to rest or to get on a horse. Of course, both coming and going we stopped to find birds as we encountered them, running into Western Bluebird, Steller's Jay, Common Raven, Hepatic Tanager and Slate-throated Restart to add to our list. Returning to the van about mid-afternoon and quite famished, a feeding frenzy ensued at the lunch table with the delicious bread, meat and veggie snacks Basilio had out for us. It was a long time to wait for lunch, but very well worth it to see the magnificent monarchs. A few made time to visit the many souvenir shops at the visitor center before boarding the bus for the two-hour drive back down the mountain to the friendly area of the Agua Blanca. At this point, only Tom and Carlos had energy for more birding, with everyone opting for a siesta before convening in the bar for the checklist and then our last dinner at the Agua Blanca dining room. Tired, but happy, everyone turned in for the night to rest up for our next day.

Wed., Feb. 15 Hotel Agua Blanca | Rio Tuxpan Canyon | Lago Cuitzeo Patzcuaro

We repeated our great breakfast routine again today, meeting in the early dawn for another sumptuous meal by the van in the parking lot. However, immediately after finishing our food and coffee, we were promptly distracted by myriad birds without even leaving the parking area! One tree seemed to be a bird magnet, consistently attracting many things to its canopy including Hooded and Streak-backed Orioles, Warbling and Plumbeous Vireos, Social Flycatcher and Cinnamon-rumped Seedeater. Nearby, a Canyon Wren foraged under some roof tiles and Rose-throated Becard, Summer Tanager and Nashville Warblers cruised through the trees, as a flock of Vaux's Swifts circled overhead. What a super start to the day—and all without moving even a few feet! Finally working through all the birds here, we climbed into the van and drove down, crossing the Rio Tuxpan, and climbing part of the way up the other side of the canyon to do some birding in dry forest habitat (or, rather, what was left of the dry forest, most of it having been converted to plum orchards and other crop production).



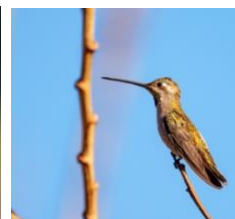
Despite the apparent lack of habitat, the birding was very enjoyable while walking down this lightly traveled road with the delightful feeling of the rising sun on our bodies! We found a lot of characteristic dry forest species here, most new to our trip list. Highlights included Black-chested Sparrow, Rusty-crowned Ground-Sparrow, Rufous-capped Warbler, Painted Bunting, Virginia's and Black-throated Gray Warblers, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, Golden-cheeked Woodpecker, Plain-capped Starthroat and great comparison studies of Nutting's and Ash-throated Flycatchers. As the morning heated up, we arrived at the bridge over the Rio Tuxpan where we noted several Black Phoebe foraging among the rocks in the river. However, the highlight bird here was found by Basilio (master driver, chef, AND bird finder, it turns out), who spotted a perched Russet-crowned Motmot on the slopes above the road. After some chasing around, all got decent looks at this magnificent bird through the scopes—a real dry forest treat and a lifer for most! Returning to the hotel, we checked out, assembled our gear, paid our bills and climbed aboard the van to travel to the town of Patzcuaro. We stopped for lunch at the lovely El Tasajo restaurant, where some saw a Gray Hawk fly overhead, then continued to the town of Cuitzeo for some quick birding on the shores of the adjacent Lake Cuitzeo. Unfortunately, most of the western part of the lake was completely dried up, so we could only bird a small section of the lake from the van while driving back and forth across the causeway. Even so, our birding stop was productive, despite the limited habitat, and we found numerous aquatic species such as Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Black-necked Stilt, Wilson's Snipe and Tricolored Heron at this spot. Many additional species were also easily spotted while driving the causeway including American White Pelican, Ring-billed Gull, Caspian Tern, Clark's Grebe and a Belted Kingfisher. It was a shame that there were no places along the causeway where it was safe to pull over and do some birding/scoping. Arriving in Patzcuaro in the very late afternoon, we found the lovely Posada Yolihuani and checked into our rooms. Patzcuaro is a designated Pueblo Mágico by the Mexican government in honor of the excellent preservation of its classic colonial style of buildings and the zócalo (central town square). After settling in and figuring out how to use the room heaters, we met in the Posada's foyer to do the bird list, then walked down the street to Bigoli, a Mexican/Italian restaurant with great menu choices. After that, we returned to the Posada to snuggle into our comforters for a good night's rest.

Thur., Feb. 16 Cerro Burro | Patzcuaro

We began the day by visiting nearby Cerro Burro, a small mountain surrounded by grasslands and cattle pasture. For our first stop, we walked along the road to the mountain, passing through open grasslands and noting the very heavy frost on the open vegetation and the frost fog covering the small lake below. This open habitat, quite



different from other sites we had previously visited, yielded several new species for the tour including a Loggerhead Shrike perched in a shrub, Chihuahuan Meadowlark (split in 2022 from Eastern Meadowlark), American Kestrel and Vesper, Savannah, Striped, Lincoln's and Chipping Sparrows. After about an hour of walking and birding, we met up with Basilio who had put a lovely breakfast together with breads, fruit and coffee waiting—we could get used to a life like this! We then continued up Cerro Burro itself for the next few hours, making many birding stops. The habitat type here is mostly oak forest with some pines scattered about; most of us were impressed by the abundance of wildflowers of various kinds despite the overall very dry weather. Although the birding was generally slower than Carlos or Dave expected, we did find a few things such as Long-tailed Wood-Partridge (several ran across the road in front of the van for an incredible second sighting of the tour!), Red Warbler (again!!), Slate-throated Redstart, several Gray-barred Wrens high in the canopy and Townsend's, Hermit and Golden-browed Warblers. As midday approached, we somewhat reluctantly headed down the mountain and back to Patzcuaro. Arriving at the hotel, we shed our gear and walked down the hill to the zócalo where we enjoyed a nice lunch at El Patio restaurant. After that, everyone had a free afternoon to explore this Pueblo Mágico and many spent some quality time visiting its many shops and appreciating the historic architecture. Late in the afternoon, Dave led a mini expedition with Cindy, Jon and Phyllis to the Jacaranda Plaza Cultural for a mezcal tasting. Assisted by the very friendly Eduardo, who went over several of the characteristics of some of the different brands, we sampled this classic Mexican distilled beverage, tasting the offerings from a couple of Michoacán distilleries. "An acquired taste," as they say, but we learned a lot, and it was fun to experience the local tasting scene. The entire group then reconvened in the Yolihuani's lobby for the checklist, then we all walked the short distance for an elegant, multi-course tasting dinner at Santa Huacal, with some of the finest Mexican cuisine on the trip. Then, we returned to the hotel to rest after a satisfying day.



Fri., Feb. 17

Cráter Volánico El Alberca | Tacámbaro | Patzcuaro

We began the day with a leisurely (by our standards!) breakfast of coffee, breads and fruit at the Posada Yolihuani, then loaded in the van for a trip to the town of Tacámbaro. Our birding stop for the morning was the fascinating site of Cráter Volcánico El Alberca, a lovely lake located in an extinct volcanic crater. This relatively low elevation site (just under 5,000 ft) provided some great birding opportunities, primarily in the trees surrounding the lake. The lake itself, as attractive as it looked to us, only had two Least Grebes and an American Coot on it, but the fairly low-statured trees around it revealed a multitude of birds, some new and some, by-now, old friends. Highlights included many Warbling Vireos and Western Tanagers, a pair of Masked Tityra at close range, Black-headed Grosbeak, Lincoln's Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak, Blue-gray and White-lored Gnatcatchers and another very cooperative Russet-crowned Motmot. Many of us were also very intrigued by several sightings of a very large, leaf-footed bug, *Acanthocephala alata*; we pondered what pain, if any, it could cause someone, as do a few other species in the order *Hemiptera*. After this delightful morning, we went to nearby Tacámbaro for lunch at Quinta Sauza, a hotel and restaurant located in the middle of extensive avocado groves. Lunch was very tasty, and many took advantage of the location and ordered one or more dishes with avocados. After lunch, we loaded the van, admiring a few Junco Silverspot (or Junco Longwing) butterflies feeding on the brightly blooming Lantana plants by the parking area. On the way back to Patzcuaro, we made a roadside stop higher in the pine-oak forest for a last shot at birds found in this habitat. Although the site did not have much activity, with a lot of persistence and playing of tapes, we were able to lure Green-striped and Rufous-capped Brushfinches into some kind of view along with another Slate-throated Restart and a brief look at a Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer, in addition to the ubiquitous Ruby-crowned Kinglets. Back at the hotel, we took a bit of a break and then a larger contingent went back to the Jacaranda for a mixture of craft beer and mezcal tasting (or both!), depending on personal preference. This was followed by our checklist session and then a walk to the nearby Casa del Naranjo Restaurant for dinner. During dinner, we were serenaded by a street musician performing several classics, including (of course) "Cielito Lindo."

Sat., Feb. 18

Estribo Grande | Churintzio | Tlaquepaque

We began with another leisurely breakfast at Posada Yolihuani and then a short drive to the nearby Mirador del Estribo Grande, located high on a ridge overlooking Lake Patzcuaro. The views were fabulous, as it was another lovely day in West Mexico, and some American White Pelicans were visible floating on the lake. From our vantage we could also make out Isla de Janitzio, the largest of the islands in the Lake. The statue of José María



Morelos, one of the heroes of Mexico's Independence, is at the highest point on the island, easily visible from this distance. The Estribo proved to be a wonderful birding site, with a long, flat and level road running for a distance along the top of the ridge. Its location on a slope allowed great views into the adjacent tree canopy too. The absolute highlight of the birding day was the appearance of a pair of Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireos in the treetops, at eye level at one point! This is truly a spectacular bird and one that Carlos had dearly hoped to find for us—he succeeded admirably! Other fun and interesting birds included a perched Northern Pygmy-Owl (found by Basilio back at the van and causing the entire group to hustle back to see it), a pair of Flame-rumped Tanagers, Transvolcanic Jays, Acorn Woodpecker (plus a granary tree), Canyon Wren and a fly-over Hook-billed Kite, to name a few. This proved to be an absolutely delightful last morning of birding on our tour, the perfect way to close out the birding part of our trip! Ending the morning, we drove back into town to pick up Jon at the Posada Yolihuani. Then we headed west, stopping in the town of Cuitzeo for lunch at the Mia Bonita Restaurant (and adding numerous drive-by aquatic species to our day list as we drove back and forth across the causeway). We made time to stop in the small town of Churintzio for one last birding stop. Although it was mid-afternoon and quite hot, we took a short walk, noting Greater Yellowlegs, Killdeer and Common Gallinule in a small stock tank, and several species in the dry countryside including American Kestrel, Vermilion Flycatcher and our best views of Cinnamon-rumped Seedeater of the trip. We then continued west for another two hours, arriving at the lovely Quinta Don Jose Boutique Hotel in Tlaquepaque, one of the neighborhoods in the greater Guadalajara metro. After we settled into our rooms, the group reconvened in the evening for our final checklist before our farewell dinner at the hotel's restaurant, Tlaquepasta. We also reviewed the departure schedule for the following day before calling it a night.

Sun., Feb. 19 Departures

Today was, unfortunately, departure day with everyone headed off to various destinations. A small group left very early in the hotel taxi while a larger group met Carlos and Basilio at the van to go directly to the Guadalajara airport at mid-morning, before Carlos and Basilio started their long drive to Mazatlán to start another tour. Dave had the last flight out and got to spend a bit more time at the Quinta Don Jose, discovering that the small courtyard there was quite rich in birds, including a Blue Mockingbird who visited him at breakfast! A lovely end to a fabulous and interesting tour.

Clock Tower (Jonathan Goding - JG), Monarchs (JG), Masked Tityra (JG), Bee on red thistle (JG), Bonding with Horses (JG), Bright Decorations (JG), Broad-tailed Hummingbird (JG), La Cima Birding (Cindy Goding - CG), Hotel Agua Blanca (CG), Ash-throated Flycatcher (JG), Lupine (JG), Group Resting (CG), Grey Horse (CG), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (JG), New Friend! (CG), Hanging with the Horses (JG), Monarch Cluster (JG), Lizard (JG), Magnificent Swallowtail (David Mehlman - DM), Russet-crowned Motmot (JG), Painted Bunting (NJ Stock), Yellow-eyed Junco (JG), Exploring the Town (JG), Butterfly (JG), Scenic (JG), Cindy (JG), Path (JG), Juno Silverspot (DM), Horseback at Estribo Grande (CG), House Finch (JG), Plain-capped Starthroat (JD), Hooded Oriole (JD), City Scape Scenic (JD)