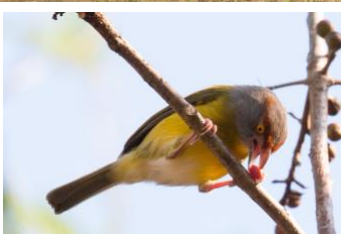


Birding Guatemala's Mayan Realm | Feb. 21 – Mar. 3, 2023 | Trip Report | by Andrew Haffenden



Guide Roland, David D., Pam, Sandra, John, Robin, Pat, David S., TL Drew



Guatemala is a spectacular birding destination, home to more than 700 bird species, from which at least 40 are regional endemics shared only with southern Mexico and Honduras. The main part of this tour focused on the highlands of interior Guatemala, a rugged chain of mountains formed by the interaction of the North American and Caribbean tectonic plates. This complex and jagged landscape of lush mountains, dry intermontane valleys, scenic lakes, and spectacular volcanoes creates a region shared only with southern Mexico and Honduras with a diversity of microclimates and habitats for many unique bird species found nowhere else in the world: Bushy-crested Jay, Wine-throated Hummingbird, Pink-headed Warbler and over thirty others.

Our group of seven, Sandra, David D., Pam, Robin, John, Patricia and David S. were led by Naturalist Journeys Leader Drew Haffenden and our very knowledgeable in-country guide Roland. In addition, local guide Freddie joined us for the Los Tarrales and Atitlán parts of the tour.



Tues., Feb. 21 Guatemala City

Five guests had arrived early into Guatemala while Robin, John and Drew arrived on start day. Around 6.00pm we gathered in the lobby bar of our comfortable hotel to meet everyone, including Roland, discuss the tour then walked to a nearby Greek restaurant for our Welcome Dinner and drinks. The group had a wide background; David S, Pat, John and Robin were family who had traveled together before, David D. and Pam own an architectural and design company in Harvard, Sandra is a Guatemala native living in the US but who has traveled and lived in myriad countries for her work with the World Bank, Roland is Honduran of German descent and lives on a small island in Roatán Bay Honduras and I am Australian living on an Alabama island in the Gulf of Mexico. Quite the mixture! After our delicious dinner we returned to the hotel for an early night as we were departing immediately after breakfast.

Wed., Feb. 22 Cayala & Cerro Alux Ecological Parks | Zunil

After our extensive and filling breakfast we met Gustavo our driver and departed for Cayala, part of Guatemala City's metropolitan green belt, offering 14 acres of natural forests, wildlife, and nature trails. This park, elevation about 5000ft, is in the heart of Guatemala City on the eastern edge of the city and has an easy walking trail. This was to be our introduction to Guatemalan birding and a busy introduction it was. Although missing our main target here, the regional yellow-throated subspecies of White-naped Brushfinch, we did see and hear nearly 40 other species including Azure-crowned Hummingbird, Lesson's Motmot, Golden-olive Woodpecker, the regional endemic Honduran Bushy-crested Jay, misnamed as it has no bushy crest, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Melodious Blackbird, great views of several noisy Band-backed Wrens (after many frustrating glimpses only of these fast-moving birds), and some seven species of our own warblers where it seemed every other birds was either a Tennessee or a Townsend's Warbler with Wilson's (Sandra's favorite but also for a while her nemesis). The stunning White-winged Tanager was definitely a crowd favorite.

Our van had a high entry but no sidestep, so a request was made of Gustavo if we could stop along the way somewhere and purchase a stool. Amazingly upon our return from birding there was a stool! How this was acquired so quickly is still a mystery. Not only that but most bags had been relocated to the roof giving us plenty of space inside to spread out. Thanks Gustavo.

Our next stop was Cerro Alux, located along the Inter-American Highway, between Guatemala City and Antigua Guatemala, 30 minutes from the capital. This mountain chain has the typical highlands pine oak forest, and the



mountains already gain some elevation at about 7000ft, hosting highland endemics. With a little luck Singing Quail can be seen here and it would be nice to have this elusive bird under our belt. Alas the forest was quiet, and no quail could be found. However killer views and even photo ops of not just one but a pair of Brown-backed Solitaire made up for it. Even for local birders this is mostly a heard but not seen bird; even Guide Roland had his closest and best views ever. Brilliant all-blue (no black head) Central American Steller's Jays also gave us a good show. The great views of Hammond's Flycatcher were useful for when we were back home. We also had Bushtit, but the local subspecies with a black mask. As it was now getting late we head down the mountain to our lunch spot, then enjoyed the volcanic countryside of Guatemala, the road rising to as high as 10,000ft as we headed west to our accommodation in Zunil at 6800ft, about 6km from the city of Quetzaltenango, the name seen on all maps and official documents but which is spoken of by everyone as Xela (pronounced shayla), its original Mayan name. The two are virtually one continuous town. We pulled into our lodge, Las Cumbres (appropriately "the hills") Hotel and Spa, overlooking a valley and overlooked by two volcanoes, active Santa Maria (the active part is downslope Santiaguito lava dome) and quiet but still active Zunil. After settling in and exploring the grounds including the natural thermal spa rooms – steam could be seen rising from points in the countryside around us and many of the rooms had their own spa tub - and scanning the nearby valley we gathered in the dining area for our first checklist and dinner. Our plan was to rise early and bird from the balcony before breakfast then head up the side of Zunil to bird the upper part of the road to Fuentes Georginas, a public thermal spa, known for its good birding at about 8000ft. Dinner included a chance to try a national dish, pepián, chicken in a thick tomato-based stew, which was delicious.

Thurs., Feb. 23 Fuentes Georginas

As planned, we spent time birding from the balcony before breakfast, rustling up some coffee from the kitchen staff who also volunteered some pastries! Some of us returned to our rooms for an extra jacket as the 7000ft elevation and a stiff wind made for some chilly birding, though huddling behind a small wall until the sun broke through helped. Melodious Blackbird could be heard down in the valley, and views of the birds plus Great-tailed Grackles gave us good comparisons of those two species. House wrens (Southern Mexico and Guatemala is the start of Southern House Wren's range down to the tip of South America) could be heard and seen just below us, and solitaires, Northern (Guatemalan) flicker, Blue-and-white Mockingbird, Spotted Towhee, Clay-colored Thrush and the grackle all added their voices to the morning chorus. Soon breakfast was ready then we loaded into the van for our ascent of the volcano. We would spend the morning in the Fuentes area, have lunch there then return to the hotel for a break, returning late afternoon for the close of day birding and to listen and look for owls and Mexican Whip-poor-will.



We pulled over about a mile from the spa area to bird our way up. Our most hoped-for target this morning was Wine-throated Hummingbird, though we knew it would be difficult as this small solitary hummingbird is only easily found when males are lekking in January. But other birds were also sought after here, including Pink-headed Warbler, Mountain Trogon, the small Blue-throated Motmot, both Green-throated and Amethyst-throated Mountain Gems, Unicolored Jay, Mountain Trogon, Golden-browed and Crescent-chested Warblers and Chestnut-capped Brushfinch. As it turned out we did indeed see all these during our time in Fuentes Georginas, and many more. Being on the edge of the drop meant that most of the vegetation was at eye level and below, very nice. We could immediately see movement, and Roland's exceptional birding by ear ability allowed him to start calling out the nearby birds. Highland Guan was calling further up was did a Mountain Trogon across the valley; Ruddy-capped Nightingale-thrush also joined in. As we walked Black-capped Swallows were recognized by their triiit call then seen and the harsh zit call of Mexican Violetear was a near continuous background noise; the birds themselves would regularly buzz by. Tennessee and Wilson's Warblers fed eagerly, and the stunning reddish orange and black Slate-throated Warbler also drew our attention. Suddenly Roland called out Pink-headed Warbler and all eyes were drawn to where he indicated. Sure enough first one then a second came through feeding. One main target on the list! Shortly afterward a hummingbird movement low down caught Roland's eye and the second hoped-for name was called – Wine-throated Hummingbird! Everyone got on it, a female. The fast-moving bird appeared and disappeared, providing just tantalizing glimpses for most; this had to do as it was our only sighting of this species. We eventually reboarded our van to move a little further up, then once again walked the road, seeing and hearing the same variety of species plus a few new ones including Chestnut-capped Brushfinch, Gray Silky-flycatcher, Crescent-chested Warbler and Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer. We also took note of small, yellow-colored fissures in the rocky road edge with emerging steam. These were small fumaroles releasing steam and, as our noses told us, hydrogen sulfide and sulfur dioxide, reminding us that although Zunil hadn't erupted for 84,000 years it still had an active heart. We eventually made it to the lookout. While enjoying the view a new feeding flock came through, including four more Pink-headed Warblers. We watched these usually "seen and gone" birds for over ten minutes at unusually eye-level close range before turning our attention elsewhere. After spending time around the lookout and spa lunch was ready. Our walk provided 29 species of high elevation birds including our two targets. Quite the morning! As it became very foggy after a leisurely lunch we made our way back down, stopping for heard birds, and returned to our hotel for some down time. We would return up the hill to experience day turning to night and the different birdsong that accompanies this change.



After our break we returned up the hill for our evening birding, driving through heavy fog for most of the way. Thankfully it started to clear at the top where we had gone directly to the lookout as Roland wanted to call in Fulvous Owl and see Mexican Whip-poor-will but also use our ears to experience the forest and its inhabitants changing shift, the diurnal birds singing their evening songs and the nocturnal wildlife announcing the start of their activities. We did indeed experience just this, a relaxing and somewhat different way to enjoy the birds and wildlife of the cloud forest. As it turned out we also had a third participant, the caretaker's dog who would respond to the call of the Fulvous Owl, apparently an evening ritual for him. As we waited a Chestnut-capped Brushfinch could be heard fussing about in the underbrush looking for some last-minute snack and to our surprise he eventually came out into the open on a nearby bridge. It turned out the gatekeeper put out leftover snacks for him, and we watched as he would collect them and stash them behind a nearby sign. Even Roland had never had such good views of this usually ground-skulking species. One off viewing was repeated when a Black Thrush and a Brown-backed Solitaire joined a motmot on an open branch for over ten minutes, maybe to enjoy the sunset. The first two are notoriously hard to see in the open, and once again Roland got his best views ever.

Although we only heard but did not see the owl a nightjar was more cooperative, calling from some bushes the flying around a little. A little after full dark we returned to the hotel, did our checklist, had dinner then retired. Tomorrow we were headed to Los Tarrales, for many Guatemala's favorite ecolodge.

Fri., Feb. 24 Las Cumbres | Los Tarrales

After breakfast we set off for our next exciting destination: Los Tarrales. Los Tarrales Reserve is considered the best birding ecolodge in Guatemala, protecting humid, subtropical forest located on the southeastern slope of Atitlán Volcano. The reserve is part of the Atitlán Important Bird Area (IBA), designated by BirdLife International, with natural forest interspersed with shade coffee plantations from 2300 to 5200 feet and I was looking forward to my third stay there. It is a nearly three-hour drive to Los Tarrales, taking us from around 7000ft down to seven hundred feet in just 25 miles, then back up to Los Tarrales. This elevation drop was reflected in the roadside stalls as carrots, cabbages and apples were replaced by bananas and coconuts and the landscape offered rubber and palm oil plantations. Although there were several time-consuming roadworks along the way we managed to avoid the worst one – often an hour's wait – by a combination of Gustavo's local back roads knowledge and the Waze app – an indispensable tool in traffic-clogged Guatemala. We arrived about 11.15am and checked in, then while our bags were being unloaded, we started birding around the immediate grounds. We only did so for about twenty minutes, but some 35 species started our Tarrales list without moving more than fifty yards, including White-bellied Chachalaca, Long-billed Starthroat, Cinnamon Hummingbird, Lesson's Motmot, Short-tailed Hawk, Orange-chinned, Orange-fronted and Pacific Parakeets, Masked Tityra, Yellow-



throated Euphonia, Yellow-winged Tanager and both Black-headed and Cinnamon-bellied Saltators. Not a bad bit of pre-lunch birding in the middle of the day! One interesting aspect of these twenty minutes was a flock of over 20 Cedar Waxwings, a very rare bird in Guatemala – Roland’s previous life total was two! This would continue throughout the tour, with good numbers being seen. We then headed into the dining room, part of the original homestead, for lunch. (The lodge started as a coffee and sugar cane finca in 1874 and continues growing shade coffee, ornamental plants and producing honey; all electricity is generated by hydroelectricity and other green methods predominate production.)

After lunch and time to settle in we began our afternoon birding, though most of us had already either wandered around or settled in across from the fruit feeder. First, we met Freddie, one of the Los Tarrales guides who would not only be with us here but come to Lake Atitlán with us, where he lived. We walked the trail leading west through a combination of open fields, forest and a little cultivated land. This trail eventually loops around a small pond partly surrounded by some impressive stands of Giant Bamboo and we finished back at the soccer field at the lodge. Our 2.5 hours on this trail and the field provided us with 53 species, including four White-bellied Chachalacas in an open tree and a flock of 37 fast-moving White-collared Swifts high in the sky. We encountered five species of parrots – Orange-chinned, separated when flying by its short tail, Orange-fronted and Pacific Parakeets, including a breeding pair of Pacific low down in a dead palm, and Yellow-naped and White-fronted Parrots. Distinguishing between often silhouetted parrots as they flew across the sky became quite the sport and learning game. A nice Peregrine Falcon also flew over and we racked up eight species of flycatchers including Rose-throated Becard, Common-Tody-flycatcher, Boat-billed (heard only) and Social Flycatchers and Great Kiskadee for a nice trainer on distinguishing these three black and white head striped, yellow birds by sound. TK (Tropical Kingbird) and two empids, Least and Yellow-bellied, rounded out the bill clickers. Early on it was almost impossible to drag Roland away from a flock of waxwings flying between an open and a leafy tree; this time the count was 65. As this appeared to be a different flock (pretty much borne out by the flocks we saw during the tour) Roland had gone from a lifetime two to a three-hour count of some 85! “Roland they’re just waxwings” became a commonly heard refrain as we traveled over the next week. Four Collared Aracaris were wonderful to watch, and the usual discussion of the correct pronunciation wove its way in circles as usual. Although we saw five White-throated Magpie-jays the ideal view and photo opportunity of these always moving birds was not to be. I think this statement is often applicable to every jay species in Central and South America. Blue-gray (a vastly underrated bird due to its widespread distribution, Yellow-winged, White-winged and Summer Tanagers were also seen, along with three species of orioles – Baltimore, Orchard and Spot-breasted. Two Red-billed Pigeons, our first, flew over while Ruby-throated and Cinnamon Hummers along with Canivet’s Emerald and Violet Sabrewing attended the pathside flowering shrubs. Mammals included Central American Agouti and the small White-tailed Deer. Eventually we had a break the regrouped in the outdoor lounge area for sundowners and the checklist. Later we would have our dinner in this same place of homemade pizzas fresh and hot from a real pizza oven – Los Tarrales is known far and wide as the best pizza



joint in Guatemala and lauded by many as the best (or equal best) in all Central America. We all went to bed happy with our tally of 68 species in three hours of birding in one location.

Sat., Feb. 25 Los Tarrales

We rose early today for a delicious pre-dawn breakfast then boarded two 4WDs to drive an often steep and washed-out track further up the side of Atitlán Volcano to bird a higher part of the reserve. We wound our way past old and newly planted coffee stands and stands of Giant Bamboo planted for erosion control. In all we rose from about 700ft at Los Tarrales to 4800ft until we reached a few old buildings on a flatter area. Here we unloaded, had some snacks then began to continue foot, birding as we went. We had several high-altitude targets today, including Azure-rumped Tanager and White-winged Tanager. One of the tricks to find several of these was to find fruiting avocado trees (small-fruited avocados, not the pear-sized ones we are used to). Freddie told us knew of a couple, but they were nearly finished so the task would be harder. This early finish was in large part due to the Waxwing eruption which meant that the demand for berries was even higher, and we saw these birds demolishing what was left on a couple of trees. The hike itself was not too bad with a few short steeper and rougher sections, the surrounding forest with some places interspersed with newly planted coffee seedlings was quite beautiful. Occasional openings afforded us vistas across the valley, which we checked for hawks and large birds such as guans, of which we saw three species – White-bellied Chachalaca and Crested and Highland Guans. A high dark morph Short-tailed Hawk did have us thinking for a bit. As expected, being tropical rainforest, we passed through stretches of quiet then a small feeding flock would pass through, often with our own northern warblers mixed in with the locals, especially Tennessee, of which we saw at least twenty. Dusky-capped, Yellow-bellied, Boat-billed and Social Flycatchers and Northern Tropical Pewee tested our flycatcher skills, and Sandra's photo ones. Sandra was our go-to photo ID when required as often she managed to get a photo even of mostly hidden birds. Once at the avocado trees which were a little down-slope we waited for birds to appear, especially the Azure-rumped. Summer and Western Tanagers obliged as did Yellow-winged but the Azure-rumped was not so cooperative. A beautiful Red-legged Honeycreeper came up slope to visit, and while David was waiting on the track an Ovenbird walked out and performed for him. Finally, Roland called out Azure-rumped, but the bird was flitting behind leaves and did not allow good views by anyone; it disappeared after a few minutes as the trees were nearly devoid of fruit. However, we persevered and were rewarded with great, close views of a stunning Blue-crowned Chlorophonia and decent views of a personal favorite, the well-named Elegant Euphonia. Eventually the Azure-rumped came back and we got brief views, enough to be counted (other than for Sandra who required a photo to get the bird on her list) though still BVD. We then headed back down to the vehicles where drinks and snacks were welcome. Along the way we added Blue-tailed and Emerald-chinned Hummingbirds to our list and Masked Tityra. A Gray Hawk high in a distant dead tree was



seen by the second vehicle, and two Band-tailed Pigeons flew down the valley. Freddie had another couple of surprises for us once we returned to the lodge area as he had discovered the daytime roosts of a Northern Potoo and a pair of Black-and-White Owls. The potoo was at first difficult to see from the track, but we got a little closer and by standing in just the right place, and tuning in our eyes, we all got good views and even photos. The owls were a little easier, as one flew though not far, but thus showing itself helped us locate it in the foliage. We then had a little personal birding time before lunch, though both Roland and Freddie were around to help.

Later in the afternoon we banded together once more to walk the Rinconada Trail through mostly developed parts of the Reserve ending in some original rainforest. It's a pleasant level walk with easier viewing due to the more open vegetation and gives better views of the sky. This came in handy as we checked off King Vulture flying over with some TVs and Blacks! Although most of the birds had been previously checked we did get better and longer views of many in part due to the more open vegetation – and of course made for better, and with several possible, photos. But we did chalk up some new ones, including White-throated Thrush and the always welcome White-throated Magpie-jay. Scrub Euphonia was also added to our list, as did both Indigo and Painted Buntings. Hummingbirds included Stunning Violet Sabrewing, Ruby-throated, Berylline and one of my favorites, Cinnamon a hummer that may not have the spectacular colors of many others, but it is model of elegance. After some 43 species, most very well seen, in less than an hour and a half we broke off, to clean up then reconvene for the ever-growing checklist prior to dinner. Tomorrow we would pack up and head a bit higher, around 5000ft, to the small town of Santiago Atitlán, overlooking the lake, but there was no hurry as our hotel was only an hour away so we planned an early start to more birding here, a late breakfast then departure.

Sun., Feb. 26 Los Tarrales | Lake Atitlan

We returned to the Rinconada trail after early coffee for a longer morning birding walk. While we expected to see much of what we saw yesterday, there were still both new birds to be found and better views and photos to be hoped for. We were satisfied in both respects. Greenish Elaenia, Yellow-throated Vireo, Long-billed Gnatwren and Morelet's Seedeater were all new and we had our first good looks at Boat-billed Flycatcher. A large flock of some 250 White-collared Swifts was nice to see, but it was the number of parrots that really made – the morning. They were mostly leaving their overnight roosts to go foraging further upslope, so were more concentrated than during their more leisurely return. We counted an amazing 110 Pacific Parakeets, 23 Orange-fronted Parakeets, eight Orange-chinned Parakeets and nine Yellow-naped Parrots. This latter is significant, as this Critically Endangered bird has gone from Little Concern fifteen years ago to its present status due to agricultural clearing and collection for the pet trade; in some areas 85-100% of nests are poached and the typical loss in transit to point of sale is over 50%; in Guatemala the population is now about 500 birds meaning that about 2% of the population flew over us this morning. Our three hours of birding netted fifty-one species, a



number of which provided our best views to date, as we had the leisure of being able to enjoy them in a more leisurely manner. Four species of orioles – Orchard, Spot-breasted, Altamira and Baltimore – are always welcome of course, and very good looks at several Warbling Vireos – a very uncommon vagrant where a number of us live – was useful for when we are birding at home. Eventually we called it a day and went for our final meal at Las Tarrales, good as always, then packed up the vehicles and headed to Santiago Atitlán and our lakeside hotel, Bambu. For many centuries, several groups of Maya origin have lived on the shores of Lake Atitlán and continue to share a relationship based on community. Divided among numerous small townships, the two main groups that share the lake are the T'zutujiles and Kaqchiqueles and we looked forward to learning of their culture during our stay at the lake.

It was a short drive to El Bambu, where we checked into our rooms surrounded by gardens. After settling in we went to a very special event, visiting the house where the effigy Maximón resided. For the Tzu'tujil people of Santiago Atitlán religious faith is a combination of Roman Catholicism and ancient Mayan beliefs (as it is in many places in the current world of the Maya). Prior to the previous Baktun (500-year cycle that ended in 2012) changes were prophesied and the grandfather figure of Maximón was created to guard and protect during the coming changes. There are many stories about him that show him to be a trickster and serving himself while appearing to serve others. But this is also the nature of the Maya when appearing to be following the Saints and ritual of Spanish Catholicism but infusing these, unbeknown to the priests, with their own beliefs and traditions. So, his ways are accepted though controlled (eg by cutting his legs off so he couldn't chase the women of the families that looked after him). Maximón is a deity, but his main function is to create a connection between the people and the other main Maya deities. People ask, via a Shaman, Maximón to ask the gods for blessings or favors on their behalf. The Shaman speaks to Maximón, entreats, argues, and reasons with him why such favors should be granted. As he is a "living" ancestor he is looked after offered food, drink, and cigarettes, has his clothes changed etc. So, the ceremony is like two friends or colleagues meeting for such a purpose, sharing drinks, a smoke and trying to come to an accord if warranted. We joined in to take part in the ceremony, from the side as do the locals, sharing a beer or soft drink and listening to the arguments, talking a little among ourselves as the local attendees commented on or nodded to a well-made point (the ceremony is carried out in the Tzu'tujil language; many locals only speak this and not Spanish). Maximón regularly is given a drink by his attendants and his cigarette replaced. Incense fills the highly decorated (with both Maya and Catholic figures and illustrations) room, and the scene is hushed, the Shaman and Maximón being the center of everyone's attention. The ceremony took a little over an hour and is certainly one of the most interesting experiences of a local religion I have experienced, as it was for others, with no sense of something for the tourists. In fact it was



due to our guide Freddie being a member of the fraternity of Cofradías that Maximón is part of that we were able to have this experience. After returning to the hotel, we gathered for late afternoon birding. Azure-crowned and Blue-tailed Hummingbirds feed at flowering bushes and a Spot-breasted Oriole attended a palm tree. We looked out over the lake including some distant mud flats and picked up Common Gallinule, Great Egret and a Spotted Sandpiper. Many Great-tailed Grackles on and near the patio were interesting to watch as they performed their social activities. We then enjoyed drinks and checklist on the patio overlooking the lake, enjoyed dinner then retired, looking forward to tomorrow morning's activities.

Mon., Feb. 27

Birding Mirador Rey Tepepul | Women's Weaving Cooperative | Finca de Providencia

As several people were interested in learning about local culture, we offered two different outings this morning. One was birding on the Mirador Rey Tepepul Trail and the other visiting a women's weaving cooperative. The birding trail was quite steep and with considerable change in altitude, so the cooperative was a good option for some as well. Roland, who knew the person in charge of the cooperative took part of the group there, and I led along with guide Freddie the birding group of Sandra, John and Robin. The start of the trail was a short drive around part of the lake, where we unloaded, had some additional breakfast then headed along the trail. The trail was an old agricultural way used by the indigenous Maya of the area to attend crops planted and is still used by them today. It drops about 1000ft down a valley, then climbs up the other side, returning in a small loop that rejoins the outbound part. Despite the steepness we saw a couple of locals carrying large loads of wood moving far faster than us, which pretty much stopped any comments by us about trail difficulty! Though mostly through forest part of the return had coffee and starch plants on the steep slope which afforded us sweeping views of the valley. Overall, it was a quite beautiful hike. And of course, there were birds. Our main target for the morning was Resplendent Quetzal, at an area of about 2 miles in where they are known to lek; we were on the edge of the season for this but hopeful they would be there. Regardless, the cool temperature afforded by our elevation plus a blue sky made the hike wonderful. But we were not disappointed with the birds; we saw both Vaux's and White-collared Swifts, noting their differences in flight, both Violet Sabrewing and Azure-crowned Hummingbirds and a Northern Emerald-Toucanet, a favorite bird of many and always nice to see. Several Brown-backed Solitaires was heard, and one seen briefly and a Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner was new. As had been the pattern a small flock of Cedar Waxwings was seen, and we immediately thought of Roland. A large flock of 35 Gray Silky-flycatchers flew between a group of trees, a bird I have usually seen in ones or two,



so this was a first. Three Euphoninids – Elegant and Yellow-throated Euphonia and Blue-crowned Chlorophonia were seen flitting about, and a Hooded Grosbeak and Black-headed Siskin added to this finch group and were also new for the trip. Raptors included a stunning Black hawk-Eagle and a Ferruginous Pygmy -Owl called away but was not seen. We eventually got to the Quetzal area and a movement revealed a female flying a little way off. This was a good sign, so we settled in on the conveniently placed log bench. Soon a male was seen flying, so for the next 30-45 minutes we stayed in the immediate area, ending up with five male and two female Quetzals, the highest total for the area known to Freddie. We were lucky enough to get close views of a couple, and though the angle and foliage got in the way some very good (Sandra) to reasonable (me) photos. We continued to bird on our return trek, the going seeming easier and quicker now we had such good Quetzal sightings under our belts and an additional 30 plus species as well, most well seen. After getting back to the vehicle we enjoyed cold drinks then headed back to the hotel and the rest of the group. Their visit with the local artisan weavers had been a great success and was rated as a trip highlight. Both this and two other cultural events – one our visit to Maximón time – are now part of the 2024 Guatemala tour along with a couple of other tour improvements.

After lunch and a break, we headed around the lake to a cattle private farm, Finca de Providencia. This was mostly open agricultural land with trees and shrubs dotted about and led down to the lake. We hadn't yet birded such habitat and were very pleasantly surprised at the variety seen – some 61 species, with quite a few firsts especially waterbirds. Pied-billed Grebe, American Coot and Purple Gallinule were added, along with Blue-winged Teal. Roland saw a Northern Pintail with his initial look around, but it couldn't be relocated for the rest of us. Great Blue, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons added to our wader list as were Belted and Green Kingfishers. Other new birds included Black Phoebe, Tropical Mockingbird, two sought after Blue and White Mockingbirds, our own Easter Bluebird, Black-headed Siskin, Lesser Goldfinch, Black-vented Oriole, and a performing Common Yellowthroat. Both possible Sharp-shinned hawks – a migratory Northern and the local sedentary (and likely to be split) White-breasted. A large flock of over 30 Bronzed Cowbirds gave us an opportunity for more detailed study. Locals were fishing at the shore, giving us a more interaction especially with a couple of kids. During our return to the hotel, we wondered why we turned off the main road and Roland and Freddie disappeared into a house. But they had arranged one further surprise. Eventually they returned – we spent our time talking about the typical above ground and colorful cemetery we were parked next to – and we drove back to the main road and along about a mile, then pulled over and we got out. Freddie search various trees and finally found what he was looking for – a family of four Great-horned Owls! We spent about fifteen minutes seeing both adults and grown chicks from close range – quite a treat. Finally, we returned to the hotel



where we sadly said farewell to Freddie, who was staying to spend time at home with family before his next tour. He was a wonderful person to meet and spend time with, always a smiling face and a very good and helpful birder.

Tues., Feb. 28

Tecpan | Restaurant Rincón Suiza & trails | Antigua Guatemala

After breakfast at the hotel, we checked out and headed towards Antigua Guatemala. Our first stop was at Finca Chichavac, in Tecpan. Finca Chichavac is in the mountain forest biome of Sierra de Tecpan at an altitude of 8200 feet. Although Pink-headed Warbler is usually the main target here we were not too concerned about our late arrival as we had had such excellent views at Georginas Fuentes. It turned out this was a good thing as we only saw one bird flitting around relatively high up in the pines. Other good possibilities here were Mexican Tufted Flycatcher, Olive Warbler (not a true warbler of either group despite the name), Gray Silky-flycatcher and Red-faced and Crescent-chested Warblers and migrant warblers. Singing Quail was also a possibility, a bird we had heard but not seen. The trail was pleasant, slightly uphill through pines with some undergrowth; the weather sunny and pleasantly cool, ideal for the two hours we spent here. By the time we had returned to the van we had tallied 25 species, including the birds listed above including three Singing Quail that appeared on the path ahead for nice looks. Other birds seen here were White-eared Hummingbird, Mountain Trogon, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, Guatemalan Tyrannulet, Hutton's Vireo, Greater Pewee and after much searching despite it calling from close range a Guatemalan (Northern) Pygmy-owl. Our views of this bird from just 25ft away, after a frustratingly long search, was certainly a highlight of the day and the tour. We then drove across the road to our lunch place, Restaurante Rincón Suiza. The restaurant back onto a well-known birding area similar to the habitat of Finca Chichavac, so after lunch we birded here for about an hour. The highlight was a Blue-throated Motmot flying back and forth from forest about 50 yards away to our trail. We then returned to our van and headed for Antigua, a little over an hour away. On arrival we checked into our beautiful Spanish style hotel, Posada de Don Rodrigo then Roland led us on an interesting city tour, talking much about the history of the city and its place in Guatemalan history. After a break we walked to a nearby restaurant for a dinner of traditional Guatemalan dishes then returned to the hotel. Unfortunately, as was the case the next night as well, heavy cloud descended blocking our view of Volcan Fuego, easily seen from the rooftop bar of our hotel, so our hoped for a fiery display of eruptions was not to be, just the daytime view where the incandescence of the eruptions is washed out by the sunlight and cannot be seen, just the ash and smoke.



Wed., Mar. 1

Antigua Birding at El Pilar | Free Time or a City-tour in Antigua

In the morning, we head to an excellent reserve at the edge of town Finca El Pilar which features a mixture of shade-grown coffee plantations and oak-pine forest. From the parking area we walked the footpath up the hill towards the hummingbird feeders, a highlight of any visit here. We spent a little over three hours here, and we were fortunate to get another look at Singing Quail, again a group of three. Northern Emerald Toucanet, Blue-throated Motmot, Guatemalan Northern Flicker, Chestnut-sided Shrike Vireo, new for the tour, both Bushy-headed and Stellar's Jays, Gray-breasted Wood-wren, Olive Warbler, Flame-colored Tanager and Rufous Collared Robin were among the 53 species seen. The six species of hummingbirds seen were Ruby-throated, White-eared, Azure-crowned, Rivoli's, Rufous Sabrewing and Berylline. Quite the haul. We then returned to our hotel and a latish leisurely lunch. We then had a couple of hours of free time to explore Antigua on our own before dinner, and most took advantage of this to do some final shopping in the many nearby stores. Our dinner was at the hotel and enjoyed by all.

Thurs., Mar. 2

Jardines de Provenza | Guatemala City

This morning after an early breakfast our van was packed with our luggage one last time as we were heading back to Guatemala City making two stops along the way. Although only an hour away our timing had to be watched, as if we arrived on the outskirts after 3.30 - 4 it would likely be a two-hour drive for the last 10 miles rather than 30 minutes. Our first stop was Cerro de la Cruz, a mountain park in the middle of the city and overlooking it. It has recently been renovated and the amphitheater seating with the large cross in from provides sweeping views across the old part of the city to Volcan de Agua on the other side. We parked at the bottom and walked a good trail up that gave us eye level views of many birds foraging in the pine/open understory woodland, including six of our own warblers; the minimum of six Grace's Warblers was the most any of us had seen in such a short period. Three species of vireos added to the mix including long views of Warbling.

Local songbirds included Guatemalan Tyrannulet, Greater Pewee, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Social Flycatcher, the local melanotis form of Bushtit and several others. The area is a know place to find Rusty Sparrow and we did, giving us exceptional views as several forage at the base and lower branches of the trees. A flock of 14 Gray Silky-flycatcher was once again a wonderful sight. After about two hours we were off again, this time just out of the city to Jardines de Provenza, the largest lavender garden in the country. This is also a private reserve with a



trail surrounded through mixed forest in the mountainous system that is part of the Central Volcanic Chain of Guatemala, an area with different types of habitats, such as cloud forests, pine-oak forests, and dry forests. This was also to be our lunch place, the restaurant sited on a hill with wonderful views of the volcanoes Agua, Fuego and Acatenango. We walked the trail first, which was relatively quiet though very worthwhile as a blue-throated Motmot came in, giving us great initial views. It decided it liked a spot just a little further down the trail, and we followed. Amazingly the bird ignored us and we spent some 30 minutes watching it forage from a very short distance away – a truly special experience. Returning to the more open area and one of the lavender fields we saw a buff-breasted Flycatcher, likely the same one we had seen heading for the trail. But it also decided it liked a certain spot, and sallied out, foraged in the lavender and returned for some 15 minutes. Another memorable sighting for all of us. We then had a relaxing delicious very well-presented lunch, including lavender infused drinks, looking out over the volcanoes. As it had been for the entirety of our tour the weather was perfect, blue skies, sunny but not too hot thanks to the elevation. By now it was midafternoon, so we returned to the van and drove into the vehicular mess that is Guatemala City and checked into our hotel. After cleaning up and evening drinks in the bar we had a final dinner together; tomorrow some of us were flying home and others heading to Tikal.

Fri., Mar. 3 Departures or Tikal Extension

The Tikal group arose early for their flight to Flores and then driving to Tikal. Others had a later start as our flights were mid-morning. We agreed the tour had been wonderful, a great combination of birding, nature, geology and the ever-present Maya culture. Guatemala is unique in Central America in this aspect, and only Peru is similar anywhere in the Americas. Both are places that must be experienced.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (David Durrant - DD), Resplendent Quetzal (Andrew Haffenden - AH), Emerald Toucanet (AH), Rufous-browed Peppershrike (AH), Butterfly (AH), Golden-fronted Woodpecker (AH), Architecture Details (DD), Clay-colored Thrush (AH), Mirador Fuentes Georginas (AH), Gray Silky Flycatcher (AH), Stunning Views (DD), Emerald Toucanet (AH), Golden-winged Tanager (AH), Collared Aracari (AH), Lesson's Motmot (AH), Blue-gray Tanager (NJ Stock), Violet Sabrewing (NJ Stock), Black-and-white Owl (AH), Boat-billed Flycatcher (NJ Stock), Common Potoo (AH), White-fronted Parrot (AH), Cinnamon Hummingbird (AH), Altamira Oriole (AH), Group Hike (AH), Resplendent Quetzal (AH), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (AH), Gustavo & Bull (AH), White-eared Hummingbird (AH), Guatemalan Pygmy Owl (AH), Cloud-forest Butterfly (AH), Golden-olive Woodpecker (AH), Group at Dinner (AH), Rivoli's Hummingbird (AH), Blue-throated Motmot (AH), Buff-breasted Flycatcher (AH), Rusty Sparrow (AH), Group (DD)