

Oaxaca Valley: Birds, Culture & Crafts

August 1-9, 2023 | Trip Report

by Joy Mendez and Eric Martinez



With Guide Eric Martinez and participants Al, Kathy and Joy...a small but charming group. 😊

Our guide and host this year was Eric Martinez, a resident of the Oaxaca Valley at Teotitlan, a village famous for rug weaving. Eric was a fabulous all-around naturalist, keen birder and avid conservationist. He interpreted the landscapes, knew the butterflies (of which there are many!) and, as a resident, his knowledge of where to find the birds was unsurpassed. Oaxaca is also famous for its food and hospitality ... dining was a big part of our fun!

Tues., Aug. 1 Oaxaca City!

We arrived in Oaxaca on different flights from the US and one too late for our small group to greet and meet over a late dinner so we waited until morning for introductions. Most important was a good night's sleep at Mision de Los Angeles in Oaxaca City to prepare for our first day of birding.



Wed., Aug. 2 La Cumbre | Ixtepeji

What can be better than birding in fresh mountain air with marvelous views back down to the Oaxaca Valley? After an early breakfast, we headed up through the vegetation zones that adorn the mountains, passing from scrub up to oak woodland and into lush humid pine oak forest located about 45 minutes north of Oaxaca City near the town of Ixtepeji, known to birders as La Cumbre. Here we explored on trails and quiet roads, moving slowly at a birder's pace since we were at 9,000 feet elevation. Among the birds we saw here were the Amethyst-throated Mountain-Gem, Blue-throated Mountain-gem, Red-tailed Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Mountain Trogon, Tufted Flycatcher, Pine Flycatcher, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Mexican Chickadee, Gray-barred Wren, Gray-breasted Wren, Russet Nightingale-Thrush, and loads of very vocal Stellar's Jay.

We took a break for lunch at a wonderful restaurant near Ixtepeji where several offerings of Oaxacan mole were sampled. Yum! But then we headed back to La Cumbre to try again to spot the elusive Dwarf Jay which, sadly, remained elusive.

But not all sightings were high in the trees. We also enjoyed wild geranium, lupine and giant agave while enjoying the cool, misty mountain climate. Additional birds spotted were Collared Towhee, Rufous-capped Brushfinch, Golden-browed Warbler, Slated-throated Redstart and the endemic Red Warbler. What a great start to the trip!

Returning to the city we walked a couple of blocks to a wonderful spot for dinner, where we tallied up our species list and reviewed the day.

Thurs., Aug. 3 Yagul | Teotitlan | Piedra Azul Reservoir | Local Weaving

Thursday morning found us on the entrance road to Yagul. This long stretch of asphalt gave us easy footing to enjoy the display of birds in the lowlands outside of Oaxaca City. Birding in Teotitlan del Valle at about 5200 feet elevation is known to birders as a great place to scan scrub vegetation for Mexican endemics and specialty species in the area. Among the species seen here were Chestnut-collared Swift, Black Swift, both Black and Turkey Vulture, Northern Harrier, Blue-capped Hummingbird, Green Kingfisher, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Crested Caracara, Rose-throated Becard, Western Wood-Pewee, Black Phoebe, Vermillion Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, Social Flycatcher, Blue Grosbeak, and Tropical Kingbird. Endemics included Bumblebee Hummingbird, Beautiful Hummingbird and Dusky Hummingbird as well as the Gray-breasted Woodpecker, Bridled Sparrow, White-throated Towhee, Cinnamon-rumped Seedeater, and Boucard's Wren.

We were entertained by a couple of special sightings: An adult Vermilion Flycatcher chasing a juvenile back and forth through the trees near us (this went on for several minutes) and a Crested Caracara flying with what looked like a dead animal (rabbit?) in its talons. We also witnessed a Tropical Kingbird chasing a White-tailed Kite. Such aerial antics were quite entertaining!



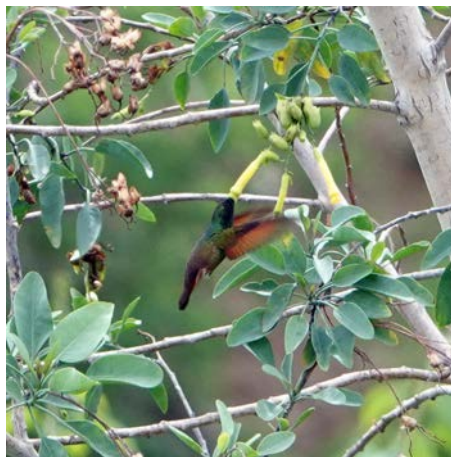
At the end of the road was the archeological site Yagul, a former city-state associated with the Zapotec civilization of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. We rambled around the site for about an hour before heading back down the entrance road for lunch.

Post lunch we drove to Teotitlan to visit a traditional Zapotec weaver, Bulmaro Perez Mendoza, who gave us a wonderful introduction to the process of making the rugs and other textiles that his workshop produces.

Eric, our guide was from the village of Teotitlan and was clearly proud of their Zapotec heritage. A quieter village than the city but rich with artisans, we ambled our way through a mix of habitats starting with some arid-scrub around town and moving up to Piedra Azul Reservoir just above the town on the road that winds into the mountains. Here we spotted Least Grebe, Green Kingfisher, Grooved-billed Ani, Berylline Hummingbird, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, Great Egret, and Black-bellied Whistling Duck.

Other birds we saw this day were House Finch, Lesser Goldfinch, and Botteri's Sparrow.

Back in Oaxaca City, we headed out on foot a couple of blocks for another fine meal where we tallied up our list, and prepped for another good field day.





Fri., Aug. 4 Las Guacamayas | Oaxaca City

Today we headed northwest on Highway 190, sampling our way through a mix of habitats. We focused much of our time in scrub vegetation and the mixed shrub arroyos that cut through them. We worked our way up to oak woodland at a mid-elevation site (about 6000 ft.) where we saw Black-vented Oriole, Audubon's Oriole, Great-tailed Grackle, Rufous-capped Warbler, Blue Grosbeak, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Red-tailed Hawk, Greenish Elaenia, Warbling Vireo, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Bewick's Wren, Gray Silky-Flycatcher, Elegant Euphonia, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, as well as endemics Oaxaca Sparrow and White-throated Towhee. But our best sighting without a doubt was a Lesser Roadrunner that Eric "called" into us. It put on quite a show for us.

We returned to Oaxaca City where we enjoyed a stroll through the historic district (Santo Domingo de Guzmán church) and lunch. Dinner that evening was lighter fare at our hotel topped with a special flan dessert that was drizzled with a coffee liqueur. Totally decadent but delish!



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

This morning's highlight was visiting the striking archaeological site of Monte Alban, the largest and most important pre-Columbian site in the state. Intricate and fanciful carvings adorn buildings, many depicting animals. The ruins are situated around an open plaza.





First, we birded our way there as the entrance road had nice views and vegetation. We walked along the roadway, sharing the road with other walkers, runners, and cyclists (and a few abandoned dogs looking for handouts), but there were plenty of birds to see as well. We saw Inca Dove, White-faced Dove, Rose-throated Becard, Western Wood-Pewee, Cassin's Kingbird, Thick-billed Kingbird, Cliff Swallow, Bushtit, Brown Creeper, and Bewick's Wren, Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, Clay-colored Thrush, Rufous-backed Robin, Blue Grosbeak and Slate-throated Redstart. Among the endemics were Boucard's Wren, White-throated Towhee, Cinnamon-rumped Seed eater and Blue Mockingbird.

Once the archeological site opened for the day, we drove in, parked and walked through the historic site. Monte Alban was occupied by Zapotec people between 500 BC and 850 AD. The 2,560 acre site sits atop of Jaguar Hill and not only



gave us incredible views of the surrounding valleys but also a chance to stretch our legs as we wandered around the site, learning about this ancient culture. This was good as we had an afternoon-long, four-hour scenic drive in the mountains to the town of San Jose del Pacifico where we spent three nights.

Dinner was at a local Italian restaurant that served wonderful and AMPLE dishes.

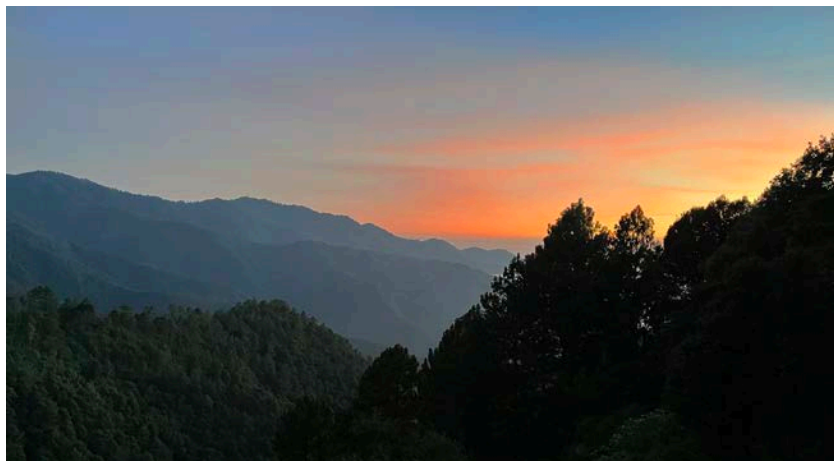
Sun., Aug. 6 San Jose del Pacifico

Cool and comfortable while birding in San Jose at 8,000 feet elevation, we had a nice-relaxed pace morning today as our lodge grounds had wonderful plantings, trees, and birds. In fact, the morning was particularly rainy, chilly and windy so we stayed close to home and hoped to see hummingbirds that frequented our temporary home. Among our sightings were Rivoli's, Amethyst-throated Mountain-Gem, Garnet-throated, and White-eared hummers.

After breakfast at the lodge, we wandered down the steep walkway to one of our cabins where we sat on the porch to enjoy the view as well as any birds that might present themselves. We saw Hutton's Vireo, Bushtit, Brown Creeper, and heard a White-throated Jay but didn't see it. We also spotted a pair of Green Spiny Lizards.

After lunch we ventured out a bit to find Back-headed Siskin, Yellow-eyed Junco, Spotted Towhee, Slate-throated Redstart, Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer as well as endemics White-throated Towhee, Red Warbler, Blue Mockingbird and Russet-Nightingale Thrush.

For dinner we returned to the same Italian restaurant and enjoyed a relaxing evening before returning to our lodge and stoking our fires (in our room fireplaces) for a cozy night.



Mon., Aug. 7 Pluma Hidalgo | Puesto del Sol

Today, after an early breakfast, we continued south on the highway, eventually dropping down in elevation to deciduous forest at a place with fine views all the way to the ocean. Birding in the upper vicinity of Pluma Hidalgo got us into new habitat with a strong tropical influence. We saw White-collared Swift, Garnet-throated Hummingbird, Blue-capped Hummingbird, Oranged-fronted Parakeet, Bat Falcon, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, White-throated Magpie-Jay, Brown-backed Solitaire, Rufous-backed





Robin, Happy Wren, Scrub Euphonia, Rusty Sparrow, Golden Crown Warbler, Black-headed Saltator including endemics Golden Vireo, Red Warbler and Red-headed Tanager.

Today was a good day for butterflies and we enjoyed seeing and photographing the Anna's 88, Confused Tigerwing, Clear-wing Mimic Queen, and Painted Lady.

We had lunch at a family-run coffee estate where we sampled shade grown coffee. Who could leave without buying some freshly roasted beans?!

We arrived back in time to see what was patrolling the gardens and feeders. Then we met up at a nearby Oaxacan restaurant to tally our findings and enjoy the local cuisine.

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

Anticipating our return to Oaxaca City, we birded the gardens and enjoyed some casual birding near the town of San Jose del Pacifico before starting the drive back to Oaxaca City. Sightings included Garnet-throated Hummingbird, White-eared Hummingbird, Mountain Trogon, Hairy Woodpecker, Crested Caracara, Hutton's Vireo, Mexican Chickadee, White-throated Jay (which we had only heard the other day so this was a real bonus!), Rudy-capped Nightingale Thrush, Olive Warbler, Red-faced Warbler, Black and White Warbler, Crescent-chested Warbler, Golden-browed Warbler, Common Bush Tanager, Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer. Our only endemics on this day was a Bumblebee Hummingbird.

With one more night at the Mision de Los Angeles, we returned early



enough to clean-up for the evening. Eric took us to our farewell dinner at Restaurant Tierra del Sol, a fantastic eatery in the historic part of Oaxaca City that specialized in the traditional foods of the area (dishes based on corn, beans, chiles, and/or cocoa). We did not leave wanting for anything especially after Joy's surprise birthday treat that we all shared.



Wed., Aug. 9 Departures

After a leisurely breakfast at mid-morning (instead of before dawn), we returned to our rooms to finalize our packing for our trip home. We were off to the airport by 11:00, content with our memories of our wonderful adventures in Mexico.

Photo credits: Joy Mendez, Eric Martinez

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