



The Birds Of Mexico April 2018

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We were in Mexico 32 days so I don't want to bore you all stupid with a blow by blow account of 32 days' birding which would tax my memory as much as your patience. Because Mexico is such a large place we broke things down into 3 areas. Firstly we flew into Guadalajara and did the central west circuit for 10 days. This involved driving north through Tepic and Mazatlan to the Tufted Jay reserve before heading back down south along the coast to San Blas before passing through Puerto Vallarta- another huge tourist trap like Acapulco and Cancun, on our way to Rancho Primera- owned by a couple of Americans. From here we did both slopes of the Volcanoes between Jalisco and Colima before returning to Guadalajara.



From Guadalajara we flew to Oaxaca and spent two weeks touring Oaxaca and Chiapas before returning to Oaxaca and flying to Cancun in the Yucatan. Here we spent another 6 days birding the Yucatan before flying back to Paris from Cancun.

But first a few words on Mexico. Mexico as a country to me was a disappointment. There was nowhere you could describe as "charming" in Mexico. The big cities were the usual faceless concrete filled structures, choked with traffic that you could not wait to leave, and the rural towns and villages were dirty scruffy third world places where nothing had changed in the last 20 years and was unlikely to change in the next 20.

The Mexicans are a vertically challenged people where you can consider yourself tall at anything in excess of 5 feet. Many suffer from the great American disease- obesity- but all in all they are a friendly if slow moving people with little concept of customer service. Like South Africans however they seem to lose that congeniality and good neighbourliness the minute they climb behind the wheel because it is every man for himself on the roads. The thing I disliked most about Mexico where the speed humps or "speed reducers" as they called them there. They are everywhere- entering all crossroads – even on major highways- in front of restaurants, shops and just dumped in the middle of the road. Traversing a small rural village you can cross 20 speed humps in two kilometres, I shudder to think of the millions of litres of fuel wasted daily crossing these things, because they are vicious and you need to cross them at less than 5 kilometres an hour- that is if you see them coming- most seem to be deliberately camouflaged.

We visited 3 of the major ruin sites at Monte Alban, Chichen Itza, and Yagul, but even these were a disappointment. Many structures were crumbling into dust and you were not allowed to approach or climb the steps on most structures- not a patch on Machu Picchu in Peru.



If you like corn-based products you will love the food in Mexico- Burritos, Gorditas, Tacos, Nachos, Tacos, Tamales, Tortillas – the list is endless. Me I prefer a potato!! Rice and black beans come as a compulsory addition to every meal. The beans always reminded me of the contents of a engine's sump so I didn't do that well with the food there although the fish and prawns along the coast were generally inexpensive and excellent.

We met our guide at the airport- a giant of a man standing 6 foot 4". He was Danish-a good birder- but you have to be a little different to want to live in Mexico for 10 years amongst people that small!! and he was definitely different. His saving grace was that he really did try to find us everything we wanted to see.



The Tufted Jay is an extremely attractive bird but like all the forest jays (and we needed 8 species of Jay in Mexico) they are really difficult to find and see well. Aside from them was so much else to see at the Tufted Jay reserve (Lots of migrating Flycatchers and Warblers- Solitaire's and Thrushes, Brush-finches, Tanagers, Towhees and Grey Silky Flycatcher) that we didn't start looking in earnest for the Jay until the last afternoon there. We walked kilometres along forest trails with no luck at all at our repeated attempts to call them in. Jesper was concerned – he had never missed the Jay there- but as we drove back to our rustic cabins, we heard them call and soon were amongst a small party of 8 or so birds. A great relief to not dip on a very special bird.

Our next overnight stop was at the village of San Blas on the coast but not before birding the highway on the way there and finding another very special bird- a Lesser Roadrunner- a much trickier bird to find than its Northern cousin the Greater Roadrunner.

We birded a mountain track behind the village and had a really great morning- Trogons, Motmots, Becards, our first Black-throated Magpie-Jay, Colima Pygmy-Owl, Mexican Parrotlet, and many more but today we had the bird of the trip- The Rosy-Thrush Tanager. An adult and a youngster moved through the bushes staying deep in the cover as always, revealing a brief view here and there but I did manage to get a photo. What a relief to crack this bird so early in the trip- now both Jesper and I could relax and enjoy our birding.

We had a boat trip planned for the late afternoon down the river La Tovara. Target birds were the Rufous-necked Wood-rail, and Northern Potoo and yes we found them both along with many herons, Ibis, Spoonbills, Kingfishers, Flycatchers and a Snail Kite.

Our next stop was a private ranch owned by an American lady who served one of the most incredible breakfasts I have ever had the pleasure to eat. You don't find many bird feeders in Mexico but there were feeders for the Hummers- Cinnamon, Broad-billed, and Plain-capped Starthroat- (we needed 32 species of hummer in Mexico and despite the lack of feeders managed to find 18 of them) and fruit trays for the Orioles-Baltimore, Hooded and Black Vented, Blue Mockingbird, Yellow Grosbeak, Greyish Saltator, Yellow-winged Caciques and Stripe-headed Sparrows. I even managed photos of the Yellow-breasted Chat now in its own unique family.



There were lots of great birds on the trails close to the ranch- an evening trip gave us Western Screech Owl Eared Poorwil, and Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and other really good birds like Rose-throated Becard and Red-breasted Chat

From the ranch we moved on to bird both slopes of the Volcano. Lots more birds- everything from Banded Quail to Nightingale-Wrens, Thrashers, and Cinnamon-bellied



Flowerpiercer. There are really so many birds to see in Mexico (we needed over 260) that every day is going to bring lots of new birds

So now we had completed our first circuit. We were flying to Oaxaca in the morning.

Someone asked me whether I thought Mexico was dangerous with all the drug wars going on, and while we never went anywhere close to the US border we saw no sign of trouble anywhere, although the Mexican army in their black uniforms did look a little intimidating on the few occasions we saw them.

I didn't realise how mountainous a country Mexico is, with a long chain running north/south the length of the country creating an Atlantic and a Pacific slope much the same as in Costa Rica and having the same effect on the bird populations on each side of the divide.

Oaxaco the town situated on the foothills of the Sierra Madre bears the same name as the Province. It is situated 3 hours' drive from the Pacific and lacks the humidity of the coast. It is an old city with a one-way street system which is grid-locked daily from 12.00 to 6.00pm. It is also home to the Zapotec ruins at Monte Alban. We had 3 nights here birding both around both Monte Alban and Yagul ruin sites.

Yagul gave us Grey-breasted Woodpecker, Nutting's Flycatcher, Boucard's Wren-(we needed 15 Wrens in Mexico and saw 13 of them) and White-throated Towhee. Monte Alban with its tourist hordes was not quite as productive but Golden Vireo and Pileated Flycatcher showed well.

We birded a couple of mountain trails outside town where we found Dusky Hummingbird, Bridled and Oaxaca Sparrows – some of Mexico's many sparrows are really good looking birds, and then at higher altitudes we found Dwarf Jay, Black Thrush, Crescent-chested, Golden-browed and Red Warblers.

Then we drove the tortuous, at times knuckle-biting mountain road down to the coast to Puerto Angel where we had arranged for a pelagic the next day. The two major targets off the central Mexican coast were Townsend's and Black-vented Shearwater- we were too far south for some of the storm-petrels that breed in the Baya California.

We went out into the bay on the smallest little skiboat/launch I have ever done a pelagic in. It was very productive morning – there were hundreds of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters sitting in flocks on the water with a few Pink-footed Shearwaters amongst them. Black-vented is another smaller brown and white shearwater and we were never able to say conclusively that we had found one. We got excited about a few small black and white Shearwaters amid the hordes but they all turned out to be Galapagos Shearwaters and not the much wanted Townsends.

There were loads of Ridley's Pacific turtles around and comically the birds would stand on their backs. Brown Boobies practiced their balancing skills while the Black Terns and Franklin's Gulls made it look easy. Closer to shore the Magnificent Frigates patrolled the shallower waters and a couple of Pomarine Jaegers paid us a visit. Despite missing our targets a very entertaining morning.

From Puerto Angel we continued to head further south down the coast all the way to the Guatamalan border.





You can step across the border into Guatemala along several trails which we did just to say we had been there. We had time to bird around Puerto Angel before leaving, finding White-throated Magpie- Jay taking over from its more northern counterpart- Black-throated. Lots more Wrens- Rufous-naped, Happy and Banded, White-lored Gnatcatcher, and West Mexican Chachalaca amongst many others.

A long drive crossing the Isthmus brought us to the Mapastepec Savannas. Here you find White-bellied Chachalaca rather than West Mexican, and Giant Wren put in its first appearance. We found some pans

alongside the road with a few Sandpipers- Least, Western, Spotted and the real prize for me- some good photos of Baird's. We found a new Oriole here- Spot-breasted and an evening excursion gave us Pacific Screech Owl.

Then it was on towards Guatemala. We had two nights in Union Juarez and birded the volcano which straddles the two countries. A late afternoon walk gave us Hooded Grosbeak and Azure-rumped Tanager and the following morning Scaly-throated and Ruddy Foliage-Gleaners, Blue-crowned Chlorophonia and Band-backed Wren. The trail to the border gave us Highland Guan, Pacific Parakeet, Cabanas' Wren, Orange-billed Nightingale Thrush, Yellow-winged Tanager, Cinnamon-bellied Flower piercer, Rusty Sparrow and many more, before packing up once again and heading for Tuxtla Gutierrez the capital of Chiapas.

We were now 18 days into the trip and a little fatigue was setting in. We birded El Ocote reserve, centred in the middle of the isthmus and a meeting point for birds from both slopes and east-west migrants. Our day here was spoiled by the weather, we had drizzle and thick mist all morning and missed one of the major targets- Nava's Wren but with so many Wrens on offer it didn't feel like too major a loss.

Our next day gave us a drive up a spectacular Canyon- Canon de Sumidero- something very different. The views were incredible- almost on a par with the Grand Canyon in the US, but it was a hot day and the birding quietened down early on. Our best bird was probably the tricky Belted Flycatcher but in the evening we picked up a nice Bearded Screech-Owl and Mexican Whip-poor-will

Our daily lists were now getting shorter and thankfully easier to manage. Next up was San Cristobel, popular with the tourists for its colonial style and heavy indigenous influence and the climate here was very pleasant. We missed our major target- Pink-headed Warbler despite trying for a whole afternoon.

We covered over 7000 kilometres in Mexico and were faced with yet another long drive the next day down to Los Tuxtla on the gulf coast. The terrain here was very steep and rugged and we decided not to walk 2 hours to try for the Tuxtla Quail -Dove. This area proved interesting as it is a release site for captivity raised Scarlet Macaws, and it was really special to see these birds flying through the mountain valleys. We found another great bird here- one we have chased through out South America- a White Hawk- brief views in the air





before it landed on the other side of the valley and never re-appeared.

We were now heading back towards Oaxaca but not before a final stop in Tuxtepec. This area has plenty of Trogons, Motmots and Toucans, Parrots and Parrotlets but I thought the Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Mexico's only Spinetail was a really neat little bird.

And so on to our last leg, a flight through Mexico City bringing us to Cancun in the Yucatan.

We arrived in Cancun at 2.00pm and spend all afternoon sorting out a hire car as our guide had messed up the booking but finally we were on our way heading for Rio Lagartos on the North Coast. We needed 3 endemics here and chased all three down the following morning- Mexican Sheartail, Yucatan Wren and the delightful little Black-throated (Yucatan) Bobwhite. We also had good views of Mangrove Vireo and Grey-crowned Yellowthroat. As always there were lots of Orioles around- but Orange Oriole was new to add to Orchard, Hooded and Altamira.

We arrived in Cancun at 2.00pm and spend

In the afternoon we drove further along the coast to Las Colarados- a salt works by the sea. Lots of "authorised" guides wanted to take us to see the flamingos, and stopped us entering the saltworks without paying. There were places where we could get to the sea and here I was delighted to find lots of White-rumped Sandpipers. I have put up a separate folder under the Birds of Mexico on my website just for Baird's and White-rumped Sandpipers. I thought they could be a good reference point should these vagrants visit our shores again.

Rio Lagartos was another small fishing village with lots of boats trying to make a living taking tourists round the mud flats looking for the flamingos. We didn't have time for that and once again we were on the road to visit the famed ruin site of Chichen Itza. We tried to get there early (a 2hour drive) before the tourist hordes from Cancun arrived. It was the best ruin site we visited and the birding there was also good. Green Jay, Yucatan Jay, Lesson's Motmot, (at last) White-fronted Parrot, and Golden-fronted Woodpecker. We had a quick lunch and then had the long drive back to Playa del Carmen to catch the ferry (a 45 minute ride) across to Cozumel.

Cozumel is another great tourist trap where food and drink cost twice as much as in inland Mexico but we just had time in the late afternoon to leave the tourists behind and bird the grounds of the country club where we found Cozumel Emerald, Yucatan Woodpecker, Cozumel Vireo, Black Catbird and Western Spindalis. The Spindalis here looked very different from the Spindalis in Cuba- they are much more darkly coloured. (another split one day I expect!)

We then raced to the other end of Cozumel town as the light was fading to find Caribbean Dove, Yucatan Flycatcher, Lesser Nighthawk, Common Pauraque, and the (Cozumel) House Wren- another species that will be split a dozen ways one day.

We had the next morning in Cozumel- Cozumel Vireo, Caribbean Elaenia, Grey Plovers in full





breeding plumage and more Emerald's and Catbirds before catching the lunchtime ferry back to the mainland.

Picking up the hire car again we now had a two drive to our final birding destination in Mexico- Puerto Felipe Carrillo. Here we could find all the remaining Yucatan endemics and another bird high on my wanted list- The Ocellated Turkey. A quick drive up the Vigia Camino road before dark gave us Rose-throated Tanager and a female Grey-throated Chat- not nearly as interesting as the male.

We were to spend the next full day driving deep into the forest along the heavily overgrown and uncared for Camino Vigia. We had to penetrate deep into the forest to stand any chance of the Turkey and were rewarded with distant views of 3 birds. They were incredibly shy and moved off the track long before we got in camera range. New birds that day included Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Smokey-brown Woodpecker, White-bellied Wren, Long-billed Gnatwren, Northern Bentbill, and Green-backed Sparrow. The going was hard and slow and there was nowhere to turn around. I prayed there were no fallen trees on the road but eventually late in the afternoon we made our way back onto the main road.

On our last day we made our way slowly back to Cancun stopping at the ruins at Muyil where we found Black-faced Ant-thrush, Grey-headed Tanager, Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, and Gartered Trogon.

We hit Cancun after lunch and checked in to our hotel. Cancun looks pretty much like Durban, built on tourist money and the starting point for the drive down to the many golfing and fishing resorts scattered down the Yucatan Riviera. We had one last bird to find and close to the mangrove swamps late in the afternoon we called out a Ruddy Crake.

So 32 days of hard birding and over 7000 kilometres travelled came to an end. Some great birds, some not so great roads and places- I probably enjoyed the little fishing villages the most but we were not sorry to be on our way home. Air France were on strike again and for a while we thought we were going to get stuck, but we flew a Spanish charter flight back to Paris to spend the day in a weirdly deserted Air France terminal at Charles de Gaul before (thankfully) joining the normal Air-France evening flight to Johannesburg – a flight somehow miraculously unaffected by the strike.

