



## **VERACRUZ, MEXICO - TRIP REPORT Oct 1-9, 2000**

**By Adrian Binns**

While watching the late night news in the hotel at Newark Airport, Kevin and I both remark that there seems to be a rather large hurricane bearing down on the Yucatan peninsula, heading in the direction of Veracruz. The phone then rings and it is Bill in Mexico City, with the news that the worst possible weather scenario is being predicted for Veracruz over the next 24 hours. He was calling just to let us know, and hopeful that we would all meet up somewhere the next day! To our amazement, as the weathermen continued to show the pounding the Yucatan was receiving, we arrived safely in Mexico.

After meeting our guide, Bob Straub, mid-afternoon at the airport in Veracruz, we began our birding shortly thereafter with a stop at the San Julian lagoon, where Northern Jacanas walk the lily pads and Social Flycatchers and Kiskadees call endlessly from the hardwoods. It isn't long before a Boat-billed Flycatcher is spotted amongst the group, giving everyone a chance to see the size and bill difference between it and a Social. Though there wasn't too much on the water, a walk through the village and search of the surrounding vegetation soon produces Groove-billed Anis, Wilson's Warbler, Hutton's Vireo, Blue-gray Tanager and Yellow-winged Tanager, two pairs of Rose-breasted Becards and a Masked Tityra. Along the opposite hill side we see the shrieking Roadside Hawk, numerous Turkey Vultures which always get scrutinized in case there is a Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, and sure enough we find one, as well as distant views of both light and dark morph Short-tailed Hawks. Before returning to the bus, we hear a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl calling, and with some searching and luck we eventually locate it 20 feet up a tree, allowing everyone a terrific look.

Pulling in to Cardel just after sunset we spot a large white group of birds kettling high above the hotel – 40 Wood Stork's – migration is on.

After an early breakfast, and an update that the hurricane was slowing down - despite the forecast that we would be hit squarely - we head towards La Mancha, where we stopped at a wetland adjoining a cattle farm where 2 Greater Flamingos have been seen for over a month, this is a first for the State of Veracruz. Feeding amongst ibis, egrets and herons were all three species of teal and 3 species of kingfishers, Belted, Green and Amazon. A lone Wilson's Phalarope is seen spinning near Pied-billed Grebe's and a juvenile Common Black Hawk was roosting on the edge of the marsh.

At La Mancha Biological Station, where Bob conducts a fall passerine count of monumental significance and totals, we encounter exquisite butterflies including Malachite, Patilla Clearwing and Bromfield's Beauty. As we head through the palm grove, Tropical Kingbirds, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles are all around us and we spot a Lined Woodpecker working the tops of several palm trees, a welcome change from the ubiquitous Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. On through the woods, where patience is required to see any of the individuals in a group of Band-backed Wrens, that have been chattering away not 50 feet from us. Frustrating...but we are rewarded. The water level in the lagoon this year is high, and the Boat-billed Herons have moved on. We get to see Black-bellied Whistling Ducks flying into the marsh and Vermillion Flycatchers making sorties from bare branches. Our target bird is the Black-headed Trogon, and though it is secretive a pair is eventually found.

Soon we climb our way out of the woods and into the scrub dune, perfect habitat for the Collared Forest-Falcon, but not to be seen this late in the morning. Noisy Aztec Parakeets fly in and out of the canopy while several Montezuma Oropendolas fly lazily across the sky.

At lunch we get word that the raptor migration in Cardel is slow, (was the Hurricane, some 200 miles to the east to blame?) and that there is a possibility that the flight would be a little further inland today. So we head to Pronatura's second raptor counting site at Chichicaxtle where they have setup a 2 story high scaffold at the end of a soccer field from which to count the migration. Upon arriving we find the flights are beginning to build, kettles of 100-400 Broad-wing Hawks, soon turn into flights five times that size, Turkey Vultures constantly on the move.....our first glimpse of migration...soon a Swainson's Hawk is picked out in a low kettle, then a Great Black Hawk followed by a juvenile Common Black Hawk. Even though this isn't a good day for the overall totals, it certainly was a sight to see.

Our last stop of the day was to Rio Escondido, an area of scrub and farmland where we hoped to see White-tailed Hawk, but had to settle for Blue-black Grassquits and White-collared Seedeaters and Red-billed Pigeons coming into roost.

Still no sign of the hurricane! It's hard to believe as it is knocking on our door, less than 150 miles away. It seems to have stalled. We spent the morning of our third day birding the dirt road that leads to Playa Chalchihuecan, giving us another perspective of the migration with small flocks of White-winged Doves, Dickcissels, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and swallows heading south. The road yields Altamira's Oriole, Blue Grosbeak, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Plain Chachalaca, Painted Bunting and several hummingbird species, Buff-bellied being the most numerous, but the most excitement was a calling Collared Forest-Falcon. Elusive to say the least, we spread out and actually had 3 calling, one within 40 feet of Kevin, but he couldn't see it. Some of us got a very brief glimpse of one here and there, but after an hour we decided today wasn't going to be the day.

We ate lunch at the Bienvenido Hotel and visited the world famous rooftop, but again flights were slow. This afternoon we stopped to check on the flight at Chichicaxtle, on our way to Xalapa, and weren't disappointed, as there was a good late afternoon flight of some 10,000

Broad-wings and several dozen Swainson's. A White-tailed Kite and a White-tailed Hawk were also seen.

The refreshing cooler temperatures at the higher elevation are delightful, and the weather fully co-operated – a far cry from our fears that the Hurricane was going to put an end to this trip. Our quaint hotel with its small courtyard, tucked away on a side street in the wonderful town of Xalapa is in stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of Cardel.

This morning we visited the Macuiltepetl Ecological Park, a busy park with cloud forest habitat. As we slowly climb up the cobblestone paths that lead to the top of the caldera, we encounter Yellowish, Cordilleran and Dusky Flycatcher; Greater Pewee; Audubon's Oriole; Green Jays; Squirrel Cuckoo; the endemic Blue Mockingbird; Rusty Sparrow; Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, White-bellied Emerald, Azure-crowned, Berryline, Blue-throated and Magnificent Hummingbird and amongst the butterflies, Isabella's, Star Satyrs, Banded Peacock's, Janais Patch's, Hortense's Longwing and Bacchi's Eighty-eight.

The journey into the caldera, proves to be very rewarding as we come across a pair of Blue-crowned Motmots skulking low in a dense shrub; Slate-throated Redstarts; Tropical Parula singing it's heart out; Crescent-chested Warbler; Spot-crowned Woodcreeper and a Black-throated Shrike Tanager.

In the afternoon we journey to the picturesque Xico Falls only to find that once again this site is being used by Hollywood, and that Arnold Schwarzenegger is filming and most of the area is off limits. After a late lunch at the outdoor café, we worked our way through hundreds of Anna's Eighty-eights (which must have just hatched), and down the steep steps leading to the lower viewing area of these spectacular falls, picking up Common Bush-Tanager and Grey-breasted Wood-Wren as well as Blue Morpho butterflies.

Our final morning in the highlands takes us to the pine-oak habitat at Las Minas. The birding today is slow, but we come across Striped Sparrow, Yellow-eyed Junco and small groups of Mexican Chickadees. The mixed flocks of warblers that we had experienced in previous years isn't as easy to come by this morning, yet we find Olive, Hermit and Townsend Warbler before locating an uncooperative Red Warbler. Several Pine Satyr's were found basking in the dappled sunlight amongst the pines.

A stop for lunch at a roadside truck stop at La Joya not only gave us a delicious meal but also gave us an opportunity to search the wooded area behind the restaurant. Aptly named Roadside Hawks were constantly in evidence, but as the mist began to lift a flock of Grey Silks flew into the canopy top along with Black-headed Siskins. As we wondered about following another mixed flock of warblers, we run into a Red Warbler, this time giving everyone good looks. Going deeper into the woods we encounter a Russet Nightingale-Thrush, more Slate-throated Redstarts and a Tufted Flycatcher. It was a wonderful stop.

The remainder of the afternoon is spent at the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa before returning to Cardel. The museum known as one of the most beautiful in the country, boasts the largest collection of Olmec pieces, including the famous colossal stone heads.

Back along the Gulf of Mexico, we spend the morning at Playa Juan Angel, or to go by its gaudy English name, Johnny Angel Beach. It was here on the beach a year previously that we felt the 7.2 earthquake centered several hundred miles to the southwest in Oaxaca. As we work our way through the farmland, towards the beach, we encounter the rare and endemic Mexican Sheartail as she returns to a perch 5' off the ground in a shrub beside the track. Rose-throated Becards, Altamara's Orioles and Couch's Kingbird's flitter back and forth across the road. Just before reaching the black sand dunes we pause to watch a truly spectacular sight as over 30 Fork-tailed and a dozen Scissor-tailed Flycatchers of all ages, pick off insects as they work a small rubbish dump while being watched by a group of Groove-billed Anis. From this stop we get our first look at Aplomado Falcons as a pair work their territory along the dunes. A sight that will be long etched in our memories was when the two adults were joined by a juvenile, to chase away an American Kestrel. The Kestrel, to everyone's amazement, somehow managed to elude them.

With a good vantage point on top of the dunes, we scanned the wetlands and pools of water in search of Double-striped Thick-Knee, before eventually finding one standing motionless and well camouflaged. The pools of water attracted an assortment of sandpipers including a Baird's, (rare for here), and about a dozen Collared Plovers, mixed in with Snowy's, Piping and Wilson's. Actually we got to see 6 species of plover and 5 species of terns by the time we had walked along the beach to the restaurant at the mouth of the river. During lunch we got to enjoy both morphs of Reddish Egret, American Avocet, Willets and Black-necked Stilts as they rested on the shoreline.

The afternoon was spent at Zempoala, a pre-historic cultural site with pyramids, temples and unique ruins. This was the 13<sup>th</sup> century capital of the Totonacs Indians who joined Hernan Cortez on his march to conquer the Aztec Empire. And with Bob translating, we got to hear from a local Mexican guide all about the lives of these people including participating in a mock sacrifice to the sun gods, while Squirrel Cuckoos worked their way through the Gumbo Limbos and a Peregrine, dark morph Swainson's, Short-tailed Hawk and Common Black Hawk glide overhead.

The overnight storm is moving away (as is the hurricane) as we arrive at La Catalana, a failed development with brush habitat and a lagoon, in bright sunshine looking at a rainbow against a backdrop of dark blue sky. Rufous-naped Wren's, Altamara's Oriole's and Vulture's drying their wings atop telegraph pole's greet us as we enter the cobblestone drive. A juvenile Grey Hawk is perched nearby. Walking towards the lagoon we hear a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl repeatedly calling, upset at something, and then hear a Laughing Falcon in the distance. We get to see the owl but the falcon eludes us. Chachalacas are seen high up in the trees as are 3 Black-headed Saltators, while the air is suddenly pierced with the sound of calling Ruddy Crakes, another species more often heard than seen.

We return to Cardel and the Hotel Bienvenido for lunch and to check on the migration. In the several hours that we spend on the rooftop we witness a small movement of approximately 3000 Broadwings, several Swainson's, a Peregrine scare the living daylights out of a Rock Dove, and an adult Zone-tailed Hawk, which gets everyone excited.

During the mid afternoon we visit La Antigua, the first town established in Mexico by Cortez, where his home still stands in ruins. A young local boy guides us through the strangler fig and fern covered ruins where tanagers and Scrub Euphonias sing from the heavy canopy and Clay-colored Robins flit about the grounds in the dense shade. Flying low above the oldest Catholic Church in the Americas, a juvenile Mississippi Kite puts on quite a show before disappearing beyond the tree line. A late afternoon leisurely boat ride up the Antigua river toward the gulf, always a highlight, produces a variety of terns, Sandwich, Royal and Caspian; Long-billed Curlews; Neotropic Cormorants; White Pelicans; all four species of Kingfisher, Green, Ringed, Belted and Amazon; Caracara's feeding on dead fish and a lone Lesser Nighthawk. With seafood being the specialty in this area, we enjoyed a wide variety of freshly prepared fish for dinner at the restaurant along the banks of the river.

Our final day of birding is spent south of Veracruz at Las Barrancas, an area of coastal short-grass prairie. We begin by birding from the vans as the tail end of the torrential downpours that have accompanied us all morning begin to leave the area, picking up Jacana's, Double-striped Thick-knee's and Limpkin. Both Fork-tailed and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers are all over; a Tropical Mockingbird (at it's northern most range) flies back and forth between shrubs; several Plain-breasted Ground-Doves drink from the puddles along the road as Mangrove Swallows fly overhead. In the distance large groups of Franklin's Gulls are on the move along the coast. Now that the rain has let up, we diligently search a small seasonal pond for Pinnated Bittern without luck. We get word from another group that they have located a Common Tody-Flycatcher. Another first for the State of Veracruz, as their list grows each year as more people bird the state. Actually we come across two playing hide and seek on the edge of the wet prairie. Furthermore, as all of us surround the shrubs we spot a Pinnated Bittern not too far away stalking what turned out to be an unlucky snake. Before leaving we are treated to a group of 25 Common Nighthawks flying overhead and a very wet Aplomado Falcon perched on a fence post.

After a picnic lunch under an awning beside the fishing port of Alvarado, we visit the large Alvarado wetlands. Unfortunately the sky remains overcast and the winds have picked up, making it unpleasant to be outside. Barely able to stand upright in the howling wind, we scope Snail Kites, Black Terns and a Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture before deciding the weather got the better of us.

Being our last evening, we spend it in the historic Zocalo or Town Square in Veracruz, which happens to be bustling with activity as vendors hawk their goods on the sidewalk, and the numerous café's fill with people from all walks of life. Here everyone enjoyed a marvelous dinner as we reencountered our most memorable moments of the trip, and were thoroughly entertained with both Bill's and Chuck's offbeat birding stories. Gracias seniors!

It's hard to imagine that 9 days ago we thought that there was a distinct possibility that this trip was going to be a total wash out - literally. You can never trust the weathermen. Yet the weather cooperated, we saw over 275 species and despite the fact that the big day never occurred (over 250,000), this trip turned out to be a great success.