



VERACRUZ, MEXICO - TRIP REPORT Oct 1-11, 2001

By Adrian Binns

Few trips can ever boast that they have witnessed a raptor migration on such a grand scale as the one we saw on October 7th. Though it wasn't the "big day", that occurred Sept 28th when northerly winds pushed 800,000 Broadwings through Veracruz ahead of schedule, seeing an estimated count of 120,000 in an hour and a half, certainly gave us a good idea of the size and magnitude of a "big day". What made this spectacle so special was that it consisted of a mixed group of Broadwing and Swainson Hawks as well as Turkey Vultures.

It wasn't any different from previous days...we left Cardel after lunch, knowing that the easterly winds had pushed any potential raptor flight inland. Before arriving at Chichicaxtle (the inland counting station at the football pitch, 15 kilometers west of Cardel), we were excited to see kettles forming in good numbers, especially within the last kilometer or two before reaching the football field. In awe that we had arrived at what seemed to be the perfect moment, we climbed out of the vans to be greeted by raptors all around us. Raptors were streaming and kettles numbering in the thousands were forming. The previous day during an hour and a half we had witnessed about 40,000, but this somehow seemed more massive in scale. Soon it became evident that the raptors were moving further inland and away from us, so we decided to head west. About 3 kilometers from Chichicaxtle we found ourselves under another kettle and settled for this spot to try our luck. Little did we know.....we were under a steady flow of raptors, that the locals describe as the "Rio de Racaces", that make their journey through this narrow part of Veracruz, between late September and mid October, on their way to wintering grounds in Central and South America.

Clearly visible to the naked eye, Swainson's both dark and light morphs made up the bulk of the raptors along with the larger Turkey Vultures while the tail end of migrating Broadwings made up the remainder of the raptors. Due to the distance from the Chichicaxtle counters, it is unlikely that the smaller sized Broadwings were ever counted!

Memorized by the large kettle above us, we followed the stream to the next kettle, and then further back along the next stream to the next kettle and further still till the next.....and on and on stretching the length of the sky. This continued for nearly an hour as we realized that what we were witnessing was a spectacle of such enormous magnitude that unless you were there it is hard to describe to anyone. Especially the emotions and feelings that overcome you as you see

raptor after raptor appearing seeming out of nowhere through the distance clouds....it truly was a “River of Raptors”.

Though the “River of Raptors” is the icing on the cake, Veracruz boasts a wide variety of habitats and excellent birding, as we found out during our 10 days. We began at San Julian a coastal lagoon and lowland scrub forest that provided us with a great introduction of the numerous common birds that we would encounter throughout the trip; Social and Boat-billed Flycatchers, Kiskadee, Band-backed Wren, Blue-grey Tanager, Brown Jay, Groove-billed Ani, Tropical Kingbird, Melodious Blackbird and Roadside Hawk. An Amazon Kingfisher perched on a post along the waters edge, a male Ruddy Ground-Dove sheltered from the whipping winds and two Zone-tailed Hawks working the far side of the lagoon proved to be the highlights.

We began our first full day of birding at La Catalana, a failed development site with a cobbled stoned road leading to a freshwater lagoon surrounded by dry thorn scrub habitat. Rufous-naped Wrens and Spot-breasted Wrens were finally able to be coaxed out into the open for wonderful views after hearing their rich songs. An adult Hook-billed Kite circled overhead, while we were able to get distance looks at Short-tailed Hawks and a Great Black-Hawk, but the showstopper was an Aplomado Falcon flying with purpose to some local destination beyond our view. A Squirrel Cuckoo, the first of many on the trip gave brief glimpses before gliding over us. We came across a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl being mobbed by a mixed flock of Buff-bellied Hummingbird, White-eyed Vireo, American Redstart, Black and White Warbler and the ubiquitous Wilson’s Warblers. At the lagoon, Northern Jacana and Pied-billed Grebes were seen, while Ruddy Crake, Least Bittern and Plain Chachalaca’s were heard.

The rooftop at the Beinvenido Hotel was slow during the mid day hours with only a sprinkling of raptors. The afternoon was spent in the small town of La Antigua, were Cortez established Mexico’s first Spanish colony in 1520, visiting the ruins of his house and the first Catholic Church built in the Americas. A cooperative Olive-sided Flycatcher was flying sorties from a bare branch adjacent to the church. We took a boat ride on the La Antigua River first riding up a feeder stream where we were able to get close to a solitary female Green Kingfisher and Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers seemed to be following our boat. A surprise was a male Lineated Woodpecker with its full blazing red headdress working the trees along the bank. Heading towards the mouth of the river and the Gulf of Mexico, we encountered an assortment of egrets, herons and Neotropic Cormorants, before reaching the sand bars and beach dunes at the mouth, which held numerous gulls including a 1st winter Franklins, a Ring-billed and a Herring as well as five species of Terns and Black Skimmer. Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Greater Yellowlegs, ‘Western’ Willet, Long-billed Curlew and Brown Pelican were all seen in good numbers. Returning at dusk both Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night-Herons crossed the bow of the boats and three Lesser Nighthawks were hawking insects above the river.

The road to Playa Juan Angel or better known by its gourdy American name of Johnny Angel Beach, is a pot holed lined, water covered dirt track that leads to a restaurant and beach that always seems absent of visitors other than birders, which is not surprising considering the conditions! But the birds are fantastic. No sooner were we out of the van, Collared Forest-Falcons began calling across the open fields. Small flocks of Dickcissels, White-winged Doves and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were moving through while we got good looks at Yellow-winged and Blue-gray Tanager, Altimira, Orchard and Baltimore Oriole's. Those with patience finally got to see the small endemic Mexican Sheartail that was sporadically visiting a flower patch behind an abandoned house.

I apologize for the trip report ending here.....somehow I managed to lose the rest of it!!