



TRIP REPORT

VERACRUZ, MEXICO Sept 28 - Oct 9, 2002

By Adrian Binns

Leaders: Adrian Binns & Robert Straub

Day 1 – Saturday September 28: San Julian; San Vicente

Steve and Sheryl were lucky enough to arrive with enough daylight left to get some birding in. After Bob met them at the airport, en route to our base in Cardel, they started the trip off well as they got to see a Limpkin in a small pond just off the highway. There was room to pull over, so they stopped and got close enough for excellent views of this interesting bird that is not often seen in the area. Then they were off for a sneak peek at San Julian, where the entire group was due to visit on Sunday. As they arrived they were treated to excellent views of Grayish Saltator, another bird not often seen well in the area. Also in the group were some Black-headed Saltators calling, and then the “*Muchachas voy!*” (loosely translated to: “Here I come, girls!”), of the Grayish Saltator chimed in for a great comparison of calls. They were then off to the lagoon in town and some nice views of Northern Jacanas right on shore only 50 feet away showing off their striking colors. Other common birds of the area were seen such as Roadside Hawk, Red-billed Pigeon, and Social Flycatcher and Great Kiskadee, providing Steve and Sheryl with a good refresher course in tropical birding, as they both had birded recently in Central America.

After San Julian, the small group was off to San Vicente, a small town on the edge of the La Antigua River with some nice scrub habitat and small wetlands. We pulled into a little patch of forest on the edge of a small wetland and were treated to wonderful birds. A small tree with several thin, dead branches at the top served as a perch for a series of birds that were quite entertaining; Boat-billed and Social Flycatchers, Tropical Kingbirds, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Scrub Euphonias, Grayish Saltators and Blue-gray Tanagers as a Yellow Warbler also flitted about - quite a show with wonderful light provided by the late-afternoon sun as it was dropping in the sky. There were also some migrants moving by as well, with Osprey, Sharp-shinned and Cooper’s Hawks, and White-winged Doves. Along the wetland we caught glimpses of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, while a Vermillion Flycatcher and an Eastern Wood-Pewee were catching insects along the fence posts.

Day 2 - Sunday September 29 : San Julian; Cardel; La Antigua

With the entire group together after a late-night arrival and with only a few hours rest, we hit the road at first light for the short ride to San Julian, a coastal freshwater lagoon surrounded by scrub forest habitat. This was a perfect introduction to some of the more common species such as Tropical Kingbird, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wilson's Warbler, Great-tailed Grackle (though a great many were in molt and consequently tailless); Blue-grey Tanager, Yellow winged Tanager; the brilliantly colored Altimara's Oriole and their cousin's Baltimore and Orchard; Red-billed Pigeon and the three look-alikes, Great Kiskadee, Boat-billed and Social Flycatcher, allowing us wonderful opportunities to see the differences between these species. Both adult and juvenile Northern Jacana's, with their yellow wings and trailing feet were seen flying from the edge of the waters to the lotus plants and a single Limpkin gave good, though distance views as it perched on a shrub. Our first Great, Snowy and Cattle Egrets flew over the water, as did a Tri-colored Heron. Perched in the open was a Grayish Saltator, Roadside Hawk and a male White-collared Seedeater; the simply stunning male Vermillion Flycatcher, who drew the attention of numerous females; a singing Melodious Blackbird, and a Couch's Kingbird (shorter and stubbier billed than a Tropical) who's 'brrear' call note drew our attention. Steve caught a short scope view of a Laughing Falcon and a pair of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls called repeatedly, in response to our imitations, or was it because they were not happy that the farmer was spraying his cattle with pesticides, under their tree! The numbers of butterflies were outstanding with Large Orange; Mexican Fritillary; Julia; Soldier; Carolina Satyr; Cloudless Sulphur; White Checkered spot; Zebra Longwing; Dorantes Longtails all over the fire flags; White and Banded Peacock along with a stunning Guatemalan Cracker which we actually got to hear 'crack' made for a fine morning.

Mid day found us atop the Beinvenido Hotel in Cardel at Pronatura Hawk Watching and count site. We missed a totally lost Golden Eagle by minutes, but were treated to a wonderful show of between 15 – 30,000 raptors in a two-hour period as they streamed above us. This was not the 625,000 that passed through 3 days earlier, but a steady parade that for the entire group was considerable more than they had seen in their entire birding lives! The flight was a mixture of Turkey Vultures and Broad-wings, though the majority were of the latter. Several Zone-tailed Hawks, Peregrines, Kestrels, Mississippi Kites and a Swainson's were also seen, as were groups of 60- 300 American White Pelicans, Wood Storks and Anhingas, all in tight groups riding the thermals.

Later in the afternoon we visited La Antigua, where Cortez established the first Spanish colony in Mexico in 1520, walking the cobbled streets visiting the first Catholic Church in mainland America and Cortez's house, which was being held up by Strangler Figs! A new sighting here was a female Summer Tanager, a soaring Aplomado Falcon and another Cracker, this time a Gray, well camouflaged on one of Cortez' fern covered walls.

From the riverside at the edge of town we took a wonderful two hour river boat ride on the La Antigua river, where Black-crowned Night-Herons were common; and we got great looks at a female Green Kingfisher; a flyby Amazon Kingfisher; a raucous group of Band-backed Wrens; roosting Grey Hawk and a Crimson-winged Longwing which was flittering about the shadows of the river bank. Journeying towards the Gulf of Mexico, we came upon large groups of Laughing Gulls; Black-necked Stilts; American Avocets; Willets of the western race; Long-billed Dowitchers, Marbled Godwits and Long-billed Curlews and a few Brown Pelicans. Terns were well represented by five species: a single Least, four Caspian, large numbers of Sandwich, several Gull-billed and good numbers of Royals. A Peregrine caused excitement as it looked for dinner, causing the birds to fly before finally settling upon a large fish that it duly got a Great Blue Heron to cough up as Crested Caracaras observed the proceedings from the dunes. Two Collared Plovers walked the waters edge as a pair of Least Sandpipers rested. A Lesser Nighthawk was seen flying across the river at dusk. We were then dropped off at our lovely riverside restaurant for their delicious local seafood.

Ending our first day at La Antigua, with the combination of the archaeological site, the boat ride, and the fantastic seafood, and also combined with our introduction to the spectacular raptor migration and the local birds of the area, always means for a great way to round out our first full day of the tour.

Day 3 – Monday September 30: Playa Chalchihuecan; Playa Juan Angel; Cempoala

At daybreak we are on the dirt road leading to Playa Chalchihuecan, hoping to spot a Pauraque, but it eludes us this morning. At our first stop along the road we heard Melodious Blackbirds and Altamira Orioles singing away and the distant call of a Collared Forest-Falcon. Several hummingbirds were buzzing some red tubular flowers on the hillside bank, the most common being a Buff-bellied Hummingbird, but we also got views of perched Ruby-throated and Black-chinned, enabling us to clearly separate the two species through primary projection and structure. While watching several Least Flycatchers and a male Ladder-backed Woodpecker, joined by a Wilson's and Yellow Warbler and a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in a tree, we caught a glimpse of a male Mexican Sheartail working some orange flowers before it decided to perch on a dead shrub right in front of us, giving us stunning views of this small, red throated endemic hummer with a forked tail. Female Blue Grosbeaks and Indigo Bunting were seen as well, as was a very cooperative Squirrel Cuckoo but the surprise was a Hook-billed Kite that was seen flying away from us. We decided to chase after the calling Collared Forest-Falcon, and descended through a field to an opening along a small valley, where we saw a Northern Harrier, and got to within 40 yards of the secretive forest-falcon but it kept itself well concealed in the forest thicket. A brave White-tipped Dove also gave away its location but again we did not see that species. Returning through the field there was a tree full of activity, with several warblers chasing each other including a Northern Parula and Northern Beardless Tyrannulet and a party of Rufous-naped Wrens, these being the central Veracruz subspecies with markings on the breast and a small

Rufous nape patch. What began as an overcast morning slowly deteriorated as a front came through with increasing amounts of rain!

We drove north hoping to get away from the weather, and it was not long before the skies cleared. At Playa Juan Angel, Ruddy Ground Doves were seen in the fields and the front bought in several hundred Gray-breasted Martins and a couple Purple Martins; this allowed us to compare the plainer female Gray-breasted under tail coverts to that of the Purple's before we were distracted by a gorgeous fluorescent hairstreak that as yet is unidentified. While looking at butterflies a small flock of immature molting Bronzed Cowbirds flew in close by and both Peregrine and Aplomado Falcon were seen in flight. Along the Rio Actopan, Short-billed Dowitchers, Avocets, Stilts, Yellowlegs and Green Herons were happily peacefully resting. We ate lunch at the Charlie Brand Hotel overlooking the estuary and gulf while scoping shorebirds, which included a Baird's and three White-rumped Sandpiper, Sanderling, a Collared Plover and numerous Black-bellied Plovers. Several Magnificent Frigatebirds, Royal Terns, Sandwich Tern and a large flock of Double-crested Cormorants were seen out at sea.

Entering what can only be described as the dump site, we were not disappointed as several colorful racer lizards put on a show speeding up and down the tracks, Green Iguana's lounged about on a shed roof before we found Fork-tailed Flycatchers perched on the cactus; Northern Mockingbird; Savannah Sparrow and 3 Aplomado Falcons who put on a show, as they flew sorties for dragonflies.

Later in the afternoon while driving to the archaeological site in Cempoala we came across four coveys of Bobwhite Quail, and got great looks at three males and a female of this subspecies, which has a rufous-orange front. The town itself has the remains of an ancient Totonac Indian religious and ceremonial site, which we visited with the help of a local guide.

Day 4 - Tuesday October 1: Puente Nacional; El Mirador; Los Cocuyes; Rio Pescados

Soon after daybreak we came across pairs of Crested Caracaras feeding on dead lizards along the potholed road to Huatusco; small groups in the adjacent pastures, and even one caracara harassing a pair of perched Aplomado Falcons as well as two Red-ored Parrots flying across the road. At a roadside stop we came across a male Vermillion Flycatcher, Least Flycatcher, Western Pewee and numerous Blue-black Grassquit males in display while jumping up as they called. Bobwhites and an Eastern Meadowlark were heard calling. Another stop further up the road, overlooking a canyon and with the snow capped Pico de Orizaba as a backdrop, Montezuma Oropendolas were flying from one tree to another and our second Couch's Kingbird of the trip was seen and heard.

A new destination for this trip was the shade coffee plantation at El Mirador. Our gracious hosts Jorge and Eileen Mueller were very excited to show off the stunning array of species to be found on their organic farm. We began with outstanding looks at a Blue-crowned Motmot, followed by

a Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo, Black and White and Black-throated Warbler in quick succession. The morning sun also produced an outstanding variety of butterflies including, Hortense's Longwing, Red Cracker, Hyacinth Morpho, Memnon Giant Owl, Numilis Banner, Celerio Sister as well as Brown, Tanna, White Striped and Longtail Skippers. Walking along the dappled sunlight path deeper within the plantation, Wedge tailed Sabrewings, Slate-throated Redstart and Common Brush Tanagers were seen, as well as great views of Olivaceous and Ivory-billed Woodcreeper working their way along the trunks of oaks and through the ferns and epiphytes. We got a glimpse of an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and heard Spot-breasted Wren and both Gray and White-breasted Wood Wren, Great-crested and Dusky-capped Flycatcher and watched a Bananaquit flying back and forth as she picked up mosses and lichens to build a nest. The butterfly activity continued at a feverish pace with Morphos everywhere and a Sister, Godman's Mapwing and Malachite seemingly at every turn, Scrub Euphonia's and a Cassin's Vireo were seen well, but the bird of the day turned out to be a surprise, a pair of brilliantly colored White-winged Tanagers.

After a relaxing lunch a light morphed Short-tailed Hawk was spotted in a kettle of Black Vultures. On the way to Xalapa we stopped along the Rio Pescados, a fast flowing river with a 1500' vertical wall along one side and watched as Oropendolas flew back and forth across the water and Spotted Sandpipers fed on the rocks. Yellow-winged Tanagers perched for our best views to date. The highlight of this wonderful day came when Steve said that swifts were flying along the canyon ridge. Upon closer investigation, they were a pair of Bat Falcon, which can act just like swifts in flight. These amazing falcons, were flying at incredible speeds back and forth turning every once in a while to catch an insect, all the time without flapping a wing beat! We watched this pair for 15 minutes as they raced about, and on one occasion even escorted a Peregrine out of their territory.

Day 5 – Wednesday October 2: Parque Macquiltetpetl; Anthropology Museum; Los Lagos (Univ. of Vera.); Xico Falls

Towering over the city of Xalapa, is an 80 acre ecological park known as Macquiltetpetl where we shared the pathways with walkers and joggers. The birdlife in this cloud forest habitat is tremendous, and no sooner were we inside when we were greeted by Townsend's, Wilson's and Tennessee warblers as well as a small flock of Green Jays. We had not even gone 100 yards when two White-naped Brush-Finches crossed the path and allowed us good views. A little further along in a sunny area two Rusty Sparrows in molt were sunning themselves on a lower branch and an Azure-crowned Hummingbird perched just off the path next to his endless nectar supply. This was not the only hummingbird about, as Wedge-tailed Sabrewings with their loud calls were very common; a Berryline was cooperative perching on a favorite branch for all to see, and some of us also managed a quick look at a Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. As we were trying to relocate a MacGillivray's Warbler, a large hummer with white undertail coverts perched in front of us – it was a female Blue-throated. As we neared the entrance to the caldera, we came across a young family of Squirrel Cuckoos being feed by their parents, seemingly oblivious to

our presence some 50 feet away. No sooner than we entered the caldera, Steve found a female Canada Warbler, and this was followed in quick succession by Northern Parula, Black-and-White Warbler, Cordilleran Flycatcher, both Western and Eastern Pewee, Slate-throated Tanager, Blue-crowned Motmot, Band-backed Wrens and calling Tropical Parulas and Gray-breasted Wood-Wrens. The highlight came when we came across a mixed flock at eye level of Golden-browed, Golden-crowned, Magnolia, Worm-eating, Canada and Wilson's Warblers; Common Bush Tanager; Slate-throated Redstart; Rufous-capped Brush-Finch and Gray-breasted Wood Wren. At the highest point of the park we climbed the tower and watched numerous butterflies fluttering about and found an Olive-sided Flycatcher perched on a dead snag. On a sunny day the butterflies in the park can be outstanding and we were not disappointed today, with Photinus Cattlehearts, Two-tailed Swallowtails, Ruddy Daggerwing, Electra Leafwing, Mayan Mimic-Crescent and Mexican Bluewing to name but a few.

After lunch we visited the excellent Museo de Antropologia in Xalapa, which is famous for its collection of colossal Olmec heads and then stopped by the University of Veracruz pond to see Least and Pied billed Grebe, before heading to Xico. Here the Texolo waterfalls dominate the scenery. As we pulled in a Bat Falcon was perched on a snag and stayed for a short while before heading off in search of dinner, which no doubt would comprise of one of the many swifts flying around. Actually over the course of several hours, and thanks in part to Carol who had a great vantage point, White-collared, Chestnut-collared, White-throated, Vaux's, Black and Lesser Swallow-tailed were seen. A tailless Oropendola flew into the large sycamore, but gave poor views - after a little debate it was deemed to be a Chestnut-headed based upon the darker back color, no head markings and even though it's bill was not yellow, but a shade of grey. Over a hundred Montezuma's flew to roost across the canyon. Black Phoebe's were common on the river boulders and 3 American Dippers were seen flying along the river from the bottom of the canyon path that leads to the waters edge at the base of the waterfall. Common Bush-Tanagers and Gray breasted Wood Wren were singing everywhere we went and some in the group caught a glimpse of a Spot-breasted Wren. Bob saw a Violet Sabrewing and as we were making our way back to the van, we noticed that the Bat Falcon had returned to his favorite perch and was feeding on a bat. It was a brilliant day of birding capped with some outstanding looks at some of the region's specialty species.

Day 6 – Thursday October 3: Pemex Station at Casa Blanca; Las Minas; La Joya; Chichicaxtle; Pemex Station at Rincon Nada; Rio Escondido

A crisp, clear morning greeted us as we stopped for the obligatory after breakfast 'pit-stop' in La Joya. Taking full advantage of the sunlight striking the pine trees behind the gas station, everyone was soon wide awake as the activity was at a frenzied pace with birds everywhere – White-breasted Nuthatch, Mexican Chickadee, Olive, Townsend's and Hermit warblers, Yellow-eyed Junco, American Robin, Eastern Bluebirds and a Hutton's Vireo, were all seen well by everyone. Continuing on to Las Minas- an area of pine-oak habitat at about 7000' in elevation, we began with a search for what turned out to be an elusive Striped Sparrow in a small

abandoned mining pit, where we found Yellow-eyed Juncos, Vermillion Flycatcher, Say's Phoebe, Brown-throated Wren and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Spreading out into the surrounding fields we came across Eastern Bluebirds, Chipping Sparrows, Mourning Dove, seven female Red Crossbills flying overhead and several Horned Larks in the fields.

The road to the canyon was productive with a small flock of Horned Larks, a tree full of Chipping Sparrows and a species tough to come by on this trip, the House Sparrow! Reaching the canyon our first bird was a Grey Silky calling from atop a pine tree, followed a small group of Bushtits; a vocal group of Steller's Jays and an uncooperative Rufous-capped Brush-Finch, which everyone eventually got to see further down the canyon road. As we progressed along the dirt road, the vastness of the canyon becomes evident, dropping some 2000'. Vantage points along the road allowed us to view White-throated Swifts at head height and pick out the smaller Vaux's Swifts. A Bearded Wood-Partridge and Brown-backed Solitaires were calling well below us, and our only Red-tailed Hawk of the trip was seen low in the canyon. A small mixed-flock produced more Townsend's and Hermits, chickadees and Ruby-crowned Kinglets. A Slate-throated Redstart and a couple of Acorn Woodpeckers worked the canyon rim, but even though some of us caught a very brief glimpse of a Bumblebee Hummingbird the highlight was about five pairs of noisy Grey-barred Wrens that chased each other about, giving us tremendous looks as they moved about the bare moss-covered tree branches. At the bend in the road the activity picked up again as both Cooper's and Broad-wing Hawk were spotted just above the canopy, Mountain Trogons called, but getting a full look at this species remained tough, as was the case with a White-eared Hummingbird but we did get to track down a Brown-backed Solitaire while having Golden-browed and Crescent-chested Warblers work the neighboring oak branches. Pine Satyr was the most common butterfly along the road.

In the middle of the afternoon we stopped at Chichicaxtle, (the football and baseball pitches where Pronatura counts raptors from atop a two story scaffold), to check in on the raptor flight and noticed that the flight seemed to be further west/inland so we backtracked a little and positioned ourselves at a Pemex gas station to watch a wonderful flight of approximately of 3,000 raptors including 2,000 Broad-wings, 200 Swainson's and 800 Turkey Vultures. Here we were also treated to excellent views of a dark-morph Short-tailed Hawk as it slowly worked the scrub habitat, occasionally doing its characteristic kiting.

Our final stop was to Rio Escondido, where we were able to bird the track along the canal above the vast savannah plain with the river running through it and another canyon wall in the distance opposite us. Working the edge of the scrub and fields, Blue-black Grassquits, Least Flycatcher, Couch's Kingbird, Lesser Goldfinch, Hutton's and White-eyed Vireo, and Rufous-naped Wrens were all seen well. A small kettle of raptors was spotted that included three Mississippi Kites, that circled higher and further away from us, and along the canal both Amazon and Green Kingfishers kept flying ahead of us, but it was two new species that got us all excited – a stunning adult Lark Sparrow feeding in the middle of the road and a pair of Gray-crowned Yellowthroats that we were eventually able to coax out into the open.

Day 7 – Friday October 4: Rancho La Fortuna; La Mancha; Beinvenido, Cardel Roof Top; Chichicaxtle; Pemex Station #1 Chichicaxtle; Rio Escondido; Carrizal Bat Cave

A new owner (Angel) had recently purchased a small farm on which there is a very productive pond, but word of an international incident the previous week, left us wondering if the gate would remain locked. Well, after a lot of arm waving and gesturing (by Angel) and Bob's diplomacy, the owner welcomed us with open arms! The short walk around some of the perimeter of the pond produced signing Dicksissels, White-fronted Parrots, Northern Waterthrush, Aplomado Falcon, a distant adult and juvenile Common Black Hawk and a fly-over juvenile Great Black Hawk, giving us wonderful looks at the difference in shape between these two species. The body of water held Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Blue-wing and Green-wing Teal, Least Sandpipers, Black-necked Stilts, Roseate Spoonbills, Least Grebes, Jacanas and an assortment of kingfishers, ibis, herons and egrets, but the surprise was a Sora that flew right in front of us and landed amongst the sedges. Above us, we witnessed passerine migration in full force as a steady stream of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and the occasional Eastern Kingbird flew past us for the hour we were there – a thousand flycatchers would be a conservative estimate.

These coastal locations are wonderful places to watch approximately 8 million diurnal passerines (as well as dragonflies and butterflies) pass through each fall including staggering numbers of swallows, and the main counting site is at La Mancha, our next stop. After a brief glimpse at a Common Black Hawk and great looks at a female Lineated Woodpecker on a Coconut Palm, we worked our way through the lowland forest finding an Ovenbird and Hooded Warblers very agitated at three calling Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls; Band-backed Wrens; a Black-headed Trogon; Gray-cheeked Thrush; White-tipped Dove; a pair of Masked Tityras feeding a youngster and several wonderful butterflies including Mexican Bluewing, Hortense's Longwing, Paula's Clearwing, Malachite's and Memnon's Giant Owl, before climbing out of the woods and onto the dunes with their elevated vantage points. Here we could see many Barn Swallows and dragonflies moving through; we had noisy Aztecs Parakeets flying by as well as a particularly cooperative bird perched in full view; an immature Grey Hawk and adult light morph Short-tailed Hawk circling close-by, but the highlight was a scope-filling view of a calling Laughing Falcon that was located perched on the edge of a tree in the shade.

Returning to Cardel I noticed a "kettle" along the side of the Sierra Madre mountain range. Getting out of the van to see exactly how large this was, it soon became evident that we had come across a huge flight, as Turkey Vultures and Broad-wings were not only hundreds deep and wide but they stretched back to the north as far as the eye could see. While we watched in awe, picking out occasional Swainson's, we estimated that there were some 35,000 - 50,000 in this 'river'. Consequently, we spent the next four to five hours chasing 'kettles', firstly at the hawk watch on top of the Beinvenido Hotel in Cardel where some 35, 000 passed through in an hour and then to the west where we had approximately 10,000 in three strong groups, some close overhead. Having seen this phenomenon over the last few years it still absolutely amazes me to witness these flights, even those with fewer numbers, and I can not find the words to describe the

emotions that go through you as the “river of raptors” streams by – you just have to be here to know what I am talking about.

At Rio Escondido we birded further down the track than we had previously in the hopes of seeing White-tailed Hawk. A Canivet’s Emerald worked the red flowers but all too briefly for all to see and the aforementioned raptor was seen very well as it flew over the ridge and above us as it headed well out over the savannah.

Bob promised us a truly outstanding experience - witnessing an estimated $\frac{1}{4}$ of a million bats leaving a bat cave. The hour ride, some over potholed covered dirt roads ended in a cornfield at dusk where we sat at the rim of a small depression, only 20 feet from the entrance, watching a steady stream of Mexican Free-tailed Bats leave their cave. Their high pitched calls very evident as they flew out and passed within inches of our heads, somehow missing all of us, before circling the edge of the cornfield and disappearing into the night. As dusk turned to darkness, rumbles of thunder produced small drops of rain, but this did not slow down the numbers, estimated at some 50 –60 per second exiting the small brick-walled opening; in fact, as long as we kept the torch’s off, the numbers built up. This certainly was a most memorable experience.

Day 8 – Saturday October 5: La Joya; Pemex Station #1 Chichicaxtle; Playa Chalchihuecan

We left a very wet Cardel in the dark heading northwest to La Joya at an elevation of 5,500 feet. Our arrival could not have been timed better, with the rain ending as soon as coffee and nut cake had been downed! Similar in habitat to Las Minas, with pines and thick underbrush, our aim was to find a roaming mixed flock, which on this occasion took a little while, but was well worth it. Townsend’s Warbler were by far the most common species with smaller numbers of Hermit’s, Mexican Chickadee’s, White-breasted Nuthatch, Yellow-eyed Junco’s, Acorn Woodpecker’s and Steller’s Jay’s, but it was a pair of Hepatic Tanager’s that first caught our attention high atop a pine tree and this was followed by a sighting of a Red Warbler. It took a while but we were all finally able to track it down and see this stunningly vivid red-colored warbler with a white auricular patch. Continuing our search for the “big” flock, we came across a female Hairy Woodpecker; American Robin; a small group of Bushtits; got brief looks at a Bumblebee and White-eared Hummingbird and saw good numbers of Grey Silkys. Finally we came upon the mother lode! Along with the usual species already mentioned, Wilson’s, Black & White, Nashville, Ovenbird, American Redstart, Slate-colored Redstart, Olive Warblers, Blue-headed and Hutton’s Vireo, Greater Pewee, Golden-browed Warbler, three Crescent-chested Warblers and three Red Warblers were all seen very well. Russet Nightingale-Thrushes kept just ahead of us, but we were finally able to watch a pair feed around the base of a pine, before they took off. We followed in the direction they flew and came across a Painted Redstart and White-striped Woodcreeper - a great find – that was very cooperative as it worked the underside of moss covered branches. Other wonderful birds included an elusive Collared Towhee, the very similar

looking Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch, which Erica found and a calling Pine Flycatcher located by Steve.

After another wonderful lunch at the truck stop, followed by a very quick roadside souvenir purchase and an ice-cream stop, we made it back towards Cardel, stopping for a few small kettles, mainly consisting of Turkey Vultures with a sprinkling of Broadwings, a light-morph Short-tailed Hawk and a Peregrine. Being a slow afternoon raptor-wise, we decided to return to Playa Chalchihuecan and continue where we left off when the rains arrived several days earlier. With Chats chattering all around us, and the occasional one putting in an appearance, we staked out a stop for Canivet's Emerald, but other than a quick glimpse here and there, it pretty much eluded all of us on this day, though Buff-bellied Hummingbirds and Groove-billed Ani's were numerous and a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl was inquisitive enough to come in, in response to our calls. A patch of red flowers nearby did produce unforgettable looks at a very cooperative male Mexican Sheartail and calling Rufous-naped Wren's. Reaching the beach we scanned the ocean, being rewarded with a distant flock of seventeen Black Skimmers, several Magnificent Frigatebirds and closer Gull-billed and Sandwich Terns. Before departing, a young female Merlin, which had been seen flying around earlier, was found perched in the lower open branches of the Australian Pines that line the edge of the sand dunes, and seemed quite at ease allowing us to observe it from only a short distance away.

Day 9 – Sunday October 6: Las Barrancas and El Yallo; Las Palmas; Las Gaviotas; Alvarado Wetlands – Toll booth at Tlacotalpan and Highway Stop; Playa Azul

A bathroom break on the way to Las Barrancas, allowed for a quick check of early-morning risers, producing Grayish Saltator and several Blue Buntings flying across the road, before one was seen briefly perched.

The vast grassland savannah with patches of scattered wetlands at Las Barrancas gave us a new habitat to explore. Being close to the Gulf, scores of waders and ducks were seen in flight including White and White-faced Ibis, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Blue-wing Teal, Brown Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants. Eastern Meadowlarks and their 'tortilla-con-chili' song seemed everywhere; Bobwhite's called as did a Barred Ant-Shrike and Yellow-bellied Elaenia; Aplomado Falcons were soon found perched on fence posts and Caracara's on tree tops; Fork-tailed Flycatchers and Vermillion Flycatchers flew from one dead branch to another while a Laughing Falcon flew across the field in front of us, with perfect early morning light shining on it, and landed on a fence post near a Double-striped Thick-Knee, who was for the most part obscured. Further up the road, we came across a lone Pinnated Bittern stalking prey in a wet meadow, which allowed us to get wonderful close-up scope views of this elusive species, clearly being able to distinguish it from American Bittern, with its barred neck, and lack of malar stripe and buff auriculars. Along this stretch of road we came across two new species; a pair of Mangrove Swallows perched on telegraph wires and Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, which are very similar to Turkey Vultures with the exception of a yellow head and white primary shafts to

the upper wing, flying characteristically low over the wetlands. The roadside ponds held jacanas, loads of Little Blue Herons, several Black-necked Stilts and Pied-billed Grebes, while a side road produced good numbers of Yellow Grassland-Finch, Northern House Wrens, a Common Black Hawk and finally great looks at Plain-breasted Ground-Dove that was tracked down by call to the center of a shrub. A stop at a small grove of trees produced a pair of Common Tody-Flycatchers feeding one of their offspring, while the adjacent wetland held large numbers of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and a Limpkin.

The freshwater lagoon behind the small village of El Yallo, had roosting Neotropic Cormorants; Tri-colored Herons; a calling Moorhen and a Purple Gallinule feeding on the flower buds of fire flag. Heading out of Las Barrancas we came across a mixed group of Scissor-tailed and Fork-tailed Flycatchers sitting on barbed wire and making short sorties for insects. At Las Palmas, which was only a stone's throw away, an area of similar habitat though with slightly shorter grass, produced good looks at Double-striped Thick-Knees, Aplomado Falcons and a very close Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture.

Heading south we stopped for lunch at an isolated beach restaurant along the Gulf, which inevitably gave us the opportunity to do some sea watching - and what a stop it turned (no pun intended) out to be. Hundreds and hundreds of Black Terns, actually it was more like thousands, were flying back and forth several hundred yards beyond the breakers. Numbers that none of us had ever seen before, with the exception of Bob who told us he once had considerably more during the height of a tropical storm, near this same spot – hard to believe! With the Black Terns flying just above the surface, Sandwich and Royal Terns, of course in far less numbers, were also about and it was while watching these terns, that we noticed a Parasitic Jaeger and then a second one, chasing a Sandwich Tern. Following the drama with great anticipation, occasionally losing the predators as they landed on the ocean, but not for long as they got up and continued their pursuit, twisting and turning until a tern ‘coughed-up’ its meal. Along the beach, a lone Sanderling was among a small group of Semi-palmated Plovers, the only ones seen on the trip.

A stop at the tollbooth at Tlacotalpan failed to produce a sighting of a local Black-collared Hawk. The roadside trees had good numbers of Orchard Oriole and the wetlands held dozens of roosting Black-crowned Night-Herons, smaller numbers of Limpkins, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks and a pair each of Common Moorhens and American Coots, but the highlight was a White-tailed Kite hanging in the air as it hunted. Our next stop was at a roadside pull-off along the Alvarado Wetlands where we found a Great Black Hawk sitting on a post ‘mantling’, no doubt hiding its food from a inquisitive male Snail Kite. A Pinnated Bittern was seen in flight and both Purple Gallinule and Limpkin were feeding amongst the water hyacinth.

Arriving in Catemaco late afternoon allowed us to get some birding in before nightfall on the grounds of our hotel. Brown Jays and Melodious Blackbirds were very conspicuous, while a small group of Chachalacas was found perched on a wall and Red-billed Pigeons returned to roosts. Yellow-throated and Scrub Euphonia's, the Los Tuxtlas race of Black-headed Saltator (with deep red throat), Masked Tityras, Baltimore Oriole, Blue-gray and Yellow-winged Tanager all were seen while Band-backed and Spot-breasted Wren were heard.

Day 10 – Monday October 7: UNAM Biological Station; Laguna de Sontecomapan

Last night's jaunt to locate the Mottled Owl that I had heard on the way to dinner proved fruitless, but we fared far better first thing this morning as one was perched above the driveway for all to clearly see.

The slow journey, due to poor road maintenance, to the UNAM Biological Station was broken up with a stop to look at roosting Red-lored Parrots followed by an overlook view of the surrounding valley and gulf coast which produced scores of egrets and a lone White-tailed Kite and then a little further up the road we stopped to scour the lush valley. Here White-tipped Dove, Hutton's Vireo, Yellow, Wilson's and Hooded Warbler were seen in the underbrush tangles while more Masked Tityra's, Montezuma Oropendolas and Chachalacas perched on a skyline tree, but the highlight was a distant white spot against the green vegetation that Bob found, which upon scoping turned out to be our target bird, the White Hawk, perched patiently awaiting the morning warm updrafts to reach the upper levels of the forest edge.

The activity around the parking lot at the Biological Station was fast and furious, beginning with a dazed Louisiana Waterthrush that had obviously hit a glass door; Violaceous Trogons were perched on the wires; Keel-billed Toucans and Collared Aracari's were flying across the road and an assortment of species were seen in the surrounding trees including Smoky-brown and Golden-Olive Woodpecker; Black-headed Saltator's; Lesser Greenlet; Black-cowled Oriole; a female Collared Trogon; Great-crested, Brown-crested and Dusky Flycatcher; Barred Woodcreeper; Spot-breasted Wren; Summer Tanager and Squirrel Cuckoos. At a clearing along the road Red-crowned and Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, Long-tailed Hermit, Ruddy Foliage-gleaner and Kentucky, Canada and Hooded Warbler captivated the group for a short time, before the sky opened up and the rains came down. This is rain forest and it is to be expected but these downpours were considerable thus cutting short any hope we had of locating a possible ant swarm from within the forest. The brief breaks were punctuated with very brief sunshine and along with that came an abundance of butterflies including Rosita and Crimson Patch's, Hortense's and Zebra Longwings, hundreds of Banded Peacocks and a couple of Juno Silverspots. We decided to move further up the road and bird the upper edge of the reserve and the surrounding open areas and second growth forest. We lucked out, as we came across a Bat Falcon perched in the open and a dozen or so Keel-billed Toucans working their way through various trees, being followed by Collared Aracari's and a Lineated Woodpecker in full view. An Olive-sided Flycatcher was spotted silhouetted on the ridge. Watching all the activity, a toucan flew too close to the Bat Falcon, who proceeded to scream and attack it as it was making its way out of the falcon's territory as quickly as possible. The orange grove beside the road held numerous female and immature Baltimore Orioles as well as two Rufous-capped Warblers, which performed well for all to see. While heading back down the road to lunch, we stopped when we came across a little bit of activity and eventually found a sulking female Blue-black Grosbeak, a Stub-tail Spadebill and a Long-tailed Hermit. Considering that the weather was not to our benefit, we had a great morning of birding.

The afternoon was spent on a very enjoyable 3-hour boat ride through the Laguna de Sontecomapan in a light drizzle. Highlights were numerous as all five kingfishers were seen, though the Pygmy only shot by on two occasions, offering virtually no satisfactory look; Common Black Hawks seemed to be at every turn including a very brave bird that sat on an overhanging branch as we drifted within 10 feet of it; Violet Sabrewings in their full glory were nectaring on riverbank vines and one showed no fear as it attacked a Black Hawk; a flock of several dozen Aztec Parakeets and a pair of Brown-hooded Parrots; a male Sungrebe who soon vanished under the overhanging trees; a juvenile Bare-throated Tiger-Heron that flew away as soon as we noticed it and a very cooperative adult that was stalking prey in the shadows; a stunning and very cooperative Yellow-tailed Oriole; our only Yellow-billed Cacique and a River Otter on our way in.

At dusk we returned to the Biological Station pausing along the way each time we caught an eye shine, which turned out to be Pauraque's. Reaching the station, as Bob gallantly searched for the tape recording, I squeaked and Erica noticed the Black-and-White Owl fly in for all of us to get an outstanding look at one of everyone's favorite family of birds. We began the day with an owl and finished with one! Magical!

Day 11 – Tuesday October 8: Nanciyaga; Playa Azul; Alvarado Wetlands – Toll booth at Tlacoltpan; Las Gaviotas; Boca del Rio

Our final morning began by walking through the remnant tropical forest at the Nanciyaga nature reserve, where the thick vegetation and tall trees make it tough to locate birds by sight. An Olivaceous Woodcreeper and a Blue-crowned Motmot called, Kentucky Warblers were heard chipping and White-breasted Wood-Wrens were frequently heard calling but it was the Ivory-billed Woodcreeper that eventually came in to a tree along the roadway that gave us the most satisfaction, providing outstanding views. Not to be outdone, a pair of White-breasted Wood Wrens were seen sounding their alarm call on a bare branch that crossed a trail through the wood as a Little Hermit came in to investigate. Spot-breasted Wrens, a commonly heard bird of the trip, was seen well for the first time by all the group; this small reserve being probably the best area we know of to see this secretive species. As the sun finally hit the canopy a sprinkling of activity was sighted high in the dead branches that included several flycatchers, including a pewee, Eastern Kingbird and Great-crested Flycatcher. The parking area produced Yellow-throated Vireos, Collared Aracari's, Blue-crowned Motmot, Northern Waterthrush and an Iphidamas Cattleheart butterfly that was well photographed! At the nature center a "Traill's" Flycatcher provided an ID challenge due to it's positioning, but we had great looks at a Kentucky Warbler on the ground. Reaching Lake Catemaco, we were greeted by Ruddy Crakes calling, and soon saw movement amongst the reeds next to the boardwalk. As many as five were very excited and several came into view, if only briefly as they criss-crossed under the decking. A large Green Iguana was spotted basking in a tree while Black-crowned Night-Herons, kingfishers, White-bellied Emeralds and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds worked the edge of the lake.

Several stops were made on the way to Veracruz, including a return visit to check on the seabirds in the Gulf. Again, we had tremendous success as the Black Terns were still about and we saw as many as five Parasitic Jaegers chasing Sandwich Terns, at times relatively close to shore. A stop at Boca del Rio, unfortunately at high tide, only produced huge numbers of Brown Pelicans, Laughing Gulls and Neotropic Cormorants, however we did pick up one last species, Ruddy Turnstones on the breakers in Veracruz.

Top participant experiences

The “River of Raptors”

Bats leaving the bat cave

Visit to El Mirador

La Antigua boat ride

Visit to UNAM Biological Station

Visit to Parque Macquiltetpetl

Top participants birds

Bat Falcons cruising the cliff tops; and eating a bat

Aplomado Falcons

Scissor-tail Flycatchers on passage

Violet Sabrewings

Parasitic Jaegers chasing terns

Laughing Falcon in flight

Black & White Owl

Olive Warblers within 5 feet

Bare-throated Tiger Heron

Fork-tailed Flycatchers at the dump