



VERACRUZ, Mexico

"The River of Raptors"

Tuesday September 28 – Sunday October 10, 2004

A Pronatura and Jaeger Tours joint venture led by Bob Straub and Eduardo Martinez of Pronatura and Adrian Binns of Jaeger Tours

Trip report written by Martin Selzer

28-September-04 –Today was a travel day for everyone and with the remnants of hurricane Karl hitting the mid-Atlantic region those of us leaving from Philadelphia and Newark were concerned about getting to Houston on schedule. As it turned out, the Philadelphia crew had reason to be concerned as a horrific line of thunderstorms hit the area just as we were scheduled to leave the gate delaying our departure by close to 75 minutes. That meant that instead of having almost 2 hours of quality time in the Houston airport we would have less than 30 minutes to make our transfer. When we landed in Houston, we shot off the plane, ran to the intra-terminal shuttle bus and boarded our flight to Veracruz ten minutes before it was scheduled to take off. As we found our seats we met the rest of the group who had also begun to wonder if we were going to make it. Not only did our flight take off on time but also all of our luggage managed to make the journey with us just as the Continental Airlines staff had promised. Anyway, two hours later we had landed at the Veracruz Aeroporta, gathered our bags, cleared customs and met Bob and the vans to take us to the hotel in Cardel. A little bit after midnight a tired group of birders made their first trip up the stairs of the Hotel Bienvenido in Cardel.

29-September-04 – It was breakfast at 06:30 as birds were migrating and our late-night arrival was no reason to not get out in the field. Gary had come in earlier than the rest of us the day before so as we ate, we met the final member of the group. Bob and Adrian both said some preliminary words about the trip, the Veracruz River of Raptors (VRR) and the region of Mexico we would be visiting. Perhaps the most significant comment was Bob's concerning what the weather was going to be for the day. He said it was not going to rain but somebody clearly wasn't listening as when we went to get on the bus a steady rain began to fall. Oh well that's how it goes sometimes. Anyway, our plans were changed from going to La Catalana, to Johnny Angel Beach. You stay closer to the bus in the event of a downpour and can bird from the restaurant at the river mouth.

We left at 07:45 and a little more than an hour later were birding in the rain, drizzle and all combinations in between. Our first bird of the trip, aside from the ubiquitous Great-tailed Grackles, was a very, very wet Boat-billed Flycatcher. We had a wonderful study of the bird's diagnostic profile as well as a thorough opportunity to test out our rain gear. Apparently we weren't the only people being inconvenienced by the rain as a crew filming a Camel cigarette commercial was also at the beach. We managed to bird while they couldn't film.

Along the riverbank we had a small group of waders consisting of Black-necked Stilts, Spotted Sandpipers, Black-bellied Plovers, Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers, Snowy Plovers and Sanderlings. Fishing out over the ocean were Royal and Sandwich Terns, Brown Pelicans and Laughing Gulls. Perched up along the dunes were the first Alpomado Falcon and Crested Caracara of the trip. After a pit stop at the restaurant, we headed to the dump. After all, what birding trip doesn't manage to make at least one stop at a garbage dump, sewage treatment facility or both? In a group of Australian Pines along the way, we had our first flock of warblers including: Black and White, Yellow, Yellow-throated, American Redstart, Magnolia and Black-throated Green. Along the river opposite this group of trees we had Northern Jacana, Yellow-crowned Night-herons and Green Herons.

The road leading to the dump was great with Altamira Orioles glowing in the treetops, Rufous-naped Wrens, Groove-billed Anis and Yellow-breasted Chats. In the dump we had a spectacular show put on by dozens of Fork-tailed and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers as well as Tropical and Eastern Kingbirds. We also had several Great Kiskadees including one agitated male who was flaring his golden-orange crown more vividly than any of us could ever remember seeing. It had stopped raining and while the sun had not come out, all these insect eaters were clearly making up for a morning with limited feeding options. They appeared to be oblivious to us as they would catch their prey and perch amazingly close to us. We picked up more Altamira Orioles, some Baltimore Orioles along with a very soggy Loggerhead Shrike. As we studied the shrike more and more and as it dried out, we were able to more easily pick out its field marks. A Merlin and two Alpomado Falcons kept everyone, birds and birders alike on their toes.

We headed back to the hotel in Cardel for lunch at 12:30 and arrived back 45 minutes later. At 15:15 we were off to La Antigua, the first home of Cortez when he arrived in the new world in 1520 to discover, conquer and plunder. A roadside stop on the way produced our first Buff-bellied Hummingbird, 50+ migrating Great Blue Herons, Peregrine Falcon, Melodious Blackbird and a Morning Warbler. It was initially thought to be a MacGillivray's Warbler but we quickly realized that the hood was incomplete and that this was a first year Mourning. We also had a distant, distant hummingbird that was thought to be a Black-chinned based on bill length, wing shape and probability.

In the small village of La Antigua we wandered the grounds of Casa de Cortez, before going to the river to take our boat ride on the Antigua River. Amongst the ruins were Yellow-eyed Vireo, Yellow-winged Tanager, Boat-billed and Social Flycatchers. It was quickly approaching 17:00 so we headed to the "boat launch" where we had two Aztec Parakeets and several Brown Jays. We split up into two boats and took to the river for the next 2 ½ hours. We quickly started picking up birds, especially long-legged waders: Great and Snowy Egret; Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night-Herons; Little Blue and Green Herons. We also had lots of land birds such as Louisiana Waterthrush, Squirrel Cuckoo, Rose-throated Becard, and Masked Tityra. We scored a hat trick of woodpeckers (Ladder-backed, Lineated and Golden-fronted) and kingfishers (Ringed, Belted and a most cooperative Amazon). After a short jaunt up a side tributary we headed out to the point and landed on the beach. Here we had terns (Royal, Sandwich, Common, and Gull-billed), Black Skimmers, more Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, Long-billed Curlew, and Black-bellied, Semipalmated and finally Collared Plovers. We returned to the boat landing at dusk and returned to Cardel for dinner. We may not have seen the VRR today but considering how bad the weather had been first thing, we managed to see a great deal.

30-September-04 – Today we got to sleep "in" as breakfast wasn't scheduled until 06:30 with a 07:00 departure to La Catalana. As we pulled off the road and started to walk into La Catalana it started to rain so we took shelter in one of the abandoned buildings of this unfinished housing development. The land had been purchased, the lots and roads laid out

but the peso crashed and the project was stopped before it had progressed any further. That left the coastal scrub habitat in place with a lagoon at the end of the main road. Luckily the rain eased up quickly and we started birding with small flocks of Dickcissels overhead and Yellow Warblers, Least Flycatchers, Social Flycatchers and Altamira Orioles feeding in the vegetation. We also had a fleeting look at a Canivet's Emerald or "Cannabis" Emerald with our Anglo-interpretation of Eduardo's pronunciation of Canivet's. We hadn't quite become accustomed to his accent just yet. We started to fan out along the deserted roadway and those bringing up the rear got on a small flock of Black-headed Saltators while Lola got a glimpse of a Coral Snake as it slithered into the scrub.

We eventually all caught up together near the lagoon and the rain had stopped so for the next 75 minutes or so we birded under partly sunny skies for the first time. Migration was soon very evident as more flocks of Dickcissels, Great Egrets, Peregrines and American Kestrels were seen moving south. A group of Blue-winged Teal with one Northern Shoveler was also seen moving south. Later in the morning a group of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers was seen on the move. As we approached the corner of the lagoon a small flock of White-collared Seedeaters was observed foraging in the grass. In the lagoon we found a few Pied-billed Grebes and Black-bellied Whistling-ducks. Around this end of the lagoon we found Yellow-breasted Chat, Yellow-winged Tanagers, Groove-billed Anis and both Dusky-capped and Brown-headed Flycatchers along with three female Rose-throated Becards.

Just about this point of the morning, Adrian spied a roosting nighthawk and after much study and debate as to whether it was a Lesser or a Common Nighthawk it was unanimously decided that it was a nighthawk species. From the angle we had we couldn't make out any definitive field marks. Since we had sunny skies for the first time on the tour, we hoped to catch some hawk migration so we headed back to the bus to get back to the hawk watch on the rooftop of the Hotel Bienvenido. As we neared the bus we could see a flock of 75-100 Anhinga catching a thermal so we had high hopes for seeing the VRR flowing.

We stayed on the rooftop from 11:15 to 13:45, enjoyed lunch up there and were rewarded with a taste of what the VRR could be. We had a few small kettles of Broad-winged Hawks, numerous Peregrine Falcons and American Kestrels, two Northern Harriers and two groups of Mississippi Kites 5-8 birds in one and 35 in the other. We also had a few groups of Wood Storks, two flocks of White Pelicans, some Double-crested Cormorants and more Scissor-tailed Flycatchers.

At 14:15 we headed to Chichicaxtle (Chichi from here on) for the afternoon flight. While the rooftop in Cardel gets the morning flight, the platform in Chichi gets the afternoon flight as the ocean breeze pushes the birds in land. Puddling in the road in Chichi was a Dark Kite-Swallowtail butterfly. A few of the more avid butterflyers on the trip got out to photograph this striking bug but most of us at the back of the bus didn't initially realize what we were missing. So after seeing a picture, Lola, Edie, Sandra and I headed back to see this butterfly before joining the rest of the group at the platform. The platform is a three-tiered scaffold set-up between a football pitch (soccer field to us Yankees) and a baseball field. Sure enough the butterfly was still at the puddle and we also got three Clay-colored Robins, a Yellow-throated Warbler, American Redstart and Buff-bellied Hummingbird. By the time we caught up with the group we learned we hadn't missed anything. A walk along the drainage channel yielded more Groove-billed Anis, a Variable Cracker and lots of migrating White Pelicans. We returned to the bus for a drink and a snack as there was no shade here and the sun was beating down. While catching our second wind, we had a pair of Scrub Euphonia in the nearby trees. We returned to the hawk watch platform and nearby patch of flowers that was being frequented by a pair of Mexican Sheartails. It took awhile but the female sheartail finally returned to feed long enough for many of us to see her bill, post-ocular eye-stripe and long tail. Just as we were about to leave a dark morph Short-tailed Hawk was seen overhead as was a decent kettle of Broad-wings. Rigo told us "tomorrow will be a good day" as we left at 17:00 to go bird at Rio Escondido.

At Rio Escondido we walked along the irrigation canal and had a few Varied Buntings, two coveys of Northern Bobwhite, Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, a Grey-crowned Yellowthroat and a brilliant male Canivet's Emerald that would perch long enough to allow us scope views. Glen Crawford of Wildside Tours had joined us and became an instant hero for finding this amazing little hummingbird! Around 18:45 it was time to return to Cardel for a buffet dinner in the cantina of the hotel and to hear a rooftop talk about Pronatura's mission by its director, Norma Ferriz.

01-October-04 – In hopes of catching a big flight that might have been backed up by the last few days of rain, we again juggled the itinerary and instead of going to Finca Hilde- El Mirador and then on to Xalapa and our hotel in Coatepec we went to Playa Chalchahuecan. This way we could do some more lowland birding and get back to Cardel easily by 11:00 if it looked like hawks were flying. We had breakfast again at 06:30 and hit the road at 07:00. Instead of our big, roomy 40-passenger bus we had two 15-passenger vans. The bus needed some minor work so we divided to conquer.

Almost immediately at Playa Chalchahuecan we had more Dickcissels calling overhead and Orchard, Baltimore and Altamira Orioles, a Vermillion Flycatcher and lots of warblers including Northern Parula as well as the first of two Laughing Falcons for the day and a gorgeous adult Grey Hawk. This was within 30 minutes of arriving. We slowly started to walk the road stopping here and there wherever there was bird or butterfly activity. Most of the birds had been seen the previous two days but with the nicer weather we had the opportunity to enjoy them under better conditions. We came to a spot that looked good for Mexican Sheartail, lots of red flowers in bloom and sure enough one popped in for a quick visit. The first of the common butterflies of the trip began to appear including Julias, Cloudless Sulphurs, Common Mestra, Gulf Fritillaries, Queens and White Peacocks. Scott picked up a Battus Stripe-streak and we watched the blue iridescence of a One-spotted Prepona glide by.

It was now close to 09:45 and we noticed lots of raptors in the sky above us. First it was the occasional American Kestrel flying south but then we had a few "sharpies" and several close up Mississippi Kites. We also had the opportunity to get a good study of a Hook-billed Kite, Northern Harrier, Osprey and several up close Broad-winged Hawks. We were near the coast evident by the soaring Magnificent Frigate birds but also by the make-up of the raptors. Still one had the feeling that something big was happening and this was supported by the numerous kettles of broad-wings we started to notice. We decided it was time to make our move back to the rooftop of the Hotel Bienvenido. As we loaded up the vans, Adrian realized that one of the "TVs" lazily floating by was in fact a Zone-tailed Hawk doing its best TV impression. So we quickly hopped out of the vans in hopes of catching this zone-tail before it sailed out of view. Still we had a mission and we quickly got back into the vans to get back to Cardel. We had made it halfway back out the road when Adrian spied a Great Black Hawk and once again we all piled out of the vans. This time we not only got good looks at this bird but we found a second Great Black Hawk following the same flight path. It was back into the vans as even in these few minutes, we could see that the kettles were growing and we were about to experience something special and something that we all had hoped to see.

Just outside of town at the main road turnoff, there were 1000s and 1000s of broad-wings swirling about in kettles everywhere one looked. Bob had us pull off to the side of the road so that we didn't miss this spectacle and what a sight to see. Standing there in the middle of a roadway "Y" junction we must have had 20,000-30,000 Broad-winged Hawks overhead. In these kettles were the occasional Osprey, Swainson's Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, accipiters and both Turkey and black Vultures. It was incredible. There were streams of birds all around us and two and three levels deep when you looked up. It truly was the "Veracruz Rio

de Raptors"! After 30 minutes of standing in the middle to the highway, we tore ourselves away from this spot and made for the rooftop finally arriving there at 11:45. Besides the official counters Kirk and Louise Moulton who had been following the broad-winged migration from Pennsylvania south met us on the rooftop. They told us the flight had kicked off about 10:10 and that 3 days earlier over 500,000 birds had been counted at Hazel Bazemore in Corpus Christi and that the distance between Corpus Christi and Cardel was about three days as the "broad-wing flies" so we could be seeing the start of something huge. We stayed on the roof from 11:45 to 13:45, had lunch brought up once again and watched hawks fly by in a seemingly never-ending stream. The official count in the 3 hours beginning at 10:00 was over 159,000 birds.

We checked out of the hotel and made a beeline for Chichi where we stayed from 14:30-16:45 before making our move to Xalapa and Coatepec. During our stay at Chichi, we had a near constant stream of large kettle of hawks after large kettle of hawks. As with the flight in the morning, many were low enough to actually enjoy them and pick out detailed field marks while others were just dots. No matter what, the abundance of what we were witnessing was impressive! We had a similar mix of birds as we had in Cardel including a few dark morph broad-wings and four Zone-tailed Hawks at least two of which we saw well. It was hard to imagine that we had seen another 150,000+ migrating hawks as well as over 600 American White Pelicans. WOW may not be the most eloquent way to describe what we were watching but it sure was accurate. Our first two days of experiencing the VRR might have only been a trickle; today we got to watch a roaring mighty river. The official count for the day tallied over 376,000 birds. We finally arrived in Coatepec and checked into the Hotel Zimpizahua for the first of our three nights there. Dinner was at El Tio Yeyo, which specializes in truncha or trout, and it was excellent.

02-October-04 – We had breakfast at 06:30 in the portico of the hotel and loaded up the bus at 07:15. We didn't have the hot buffet options of the Hotel Bienvenido but the fruit, pastries, coffee and juice tasted fine just the same. Our first stop of the day was the cloud forest in Xalapa in the Marcuilapetel Park. The park is an old, dormant volcano with wide paths that are used by walkers, runners and birders alike. You slowly wind your way up the path, which climbs very gradually, until you come to the caldera (crater) and then you can follow the paths down into it. Just inside the gate we had our first Wedge-tailed Sabrewing and some flycatchers. We then made a short move until we hit a good size flock of birds that included: Canada Warbler, Townsend's Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Baltimore Oriole, Ferruginous Pygmy-owl, Green Jay, Blue-headed Vireo and Cordilleran Flycatcher. It was a very nice start to the day and all the time walkers and joggers kept passing us by.

Our next stop was a small excavation area where we ran into the birding club of Xalapa on their Saturday morning walk. This group was mostly new, young birders and it was nice to see them out. The more experienced members of the Xalapa birding club, such as Bob and Eduardo, typically might have been with them had they not been helping out with all the ongoing tours. Anyway, the sun was shining on the vegetation growing on the hillside and we had Azure-crowned and Berylline Hummingbirds, Blue Mockingbirds and many of the same flycatchers we had already seen in the park. Adrian had a Fan-tailed Warbler that eluded the group before we continued working our way up the path. We were making slow progress as we kept stopping for birds and butterflies including Anna's Eighty-eights, Mountain Heliconians and Carolina Satyrs. A banos stop provided us with wonderful looks at a Berylline Hummingbird that was feeding in the nearby flowers. The group started to spread out along the path until the head of the line came to a small "garden" area where we encountered another nice flock of warblers including: Golden-crowned, Chestnut-sided, Nashville, Black-throated Green and Black and White. We regrouped, posed for a group picture that was taken by one of the Xalapa birders who had joined us and moved on up to the caldera.

Down into the caldera we all went and soon we found more Golden-crowned Warblers, a Slate-throated Redstart, American Redstarts and Yellow-throated Euphonias. We kept moving until Kate stepped on an ant nest and soon we all had to wait as she went ahead of us to deal with the ants in her pants without the aid of 17 pairs of eyes armed with binoculars. Once she had dealt with this problem we moved along being careful not to repeat her mistake and we came across another nice flock of birds consisting of many of the warblers we had seen earlier in the park as well as Hooded, MacGillivray's, and Worm-eating Warbler. In the base of the caldera we found Lesser Goldfinch and Greater Pewee. We started up out of the caldera and came across the first Tropical Parula of the trip. At the top of the hill is a small observation tower and from this treetop vantage point we could look down on many butterflies such as Giant and Two-tailed Swallowtails, and Two-barred Flashers. We also had one of the "sisters" but we couldn't identify it based on the references we had with us.

There is also a nature center at the top of the hill. Here injured raptors are kept for educational purposes so we had up close and personal looks at Harris's Hawk, Crested Caracara, Common Black Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, White Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk and Roadside Hawk. After taking advantage of this "Kodak" opportunity (in this age of digital cameras, I wonder if this phrase will survive?), we made a beeline more or less down the path to get lunch. Today's lunch was toasted panini sandwiches from a local vendor and they tasted great. Bob learned about her when she began to show up at the Pronatura office selling her sandwiches so he arranged for her to meet us at one of the park gates. It was now almost 14:00 and we had an appointment for a guided tour of the Anthropology Museum in Xalapa. We spent about 90 minutes in the museum between our tour and a visit to the gift shop.

It was then on to Xico and Casada de Mexoptel. We spent from 16:30-18:45 at the falls. The falls and the river below it is where "Romancing The Stone", "Clear and Present Danger" and Arnold's "Collateral Damage" had been shot and from the parking area it was about a 300 foot drop in elevation. The walk to the pump station at the bottom of the gorge and back up reminded me of the walk to and from the lighthouse at Point Reyes in California. Anyway, besides the scenery we were here for birds and we had Montezuma Oropendola, White-crowned Parrots, Common Bush-tanagers, Rufous-capped Warblers, American Dippers, Black Phoebe and two Bat Falcons perched above us on the wires over the gorge. We also had some very distant Chestnut-collared Swifts and a Green Kingfisher. One of the biggest surprises was seeing a River Otter, though it was in the trout pens. Schwinne had a Striped Hog-nosed Skunk walk across the path as she waited near the top of the steps.

It was then back to the hotel and a quick turn around so we could catch some dinner before everything got crowded on Saturday night. Unfortunately, we didn't have the best directions in the world and our bus took a scenic tour of Coatepec. We circled the zocalo several times but couldn't find our intended destination before settling for a fine substitute. Before getting back on the bus we strolled through the zocalo and returned to the hotel and our rooms around 23:00. It had been a long but diverse and good day.

03-October-04 – It poured down rain overnight and all one could think as you listened to the rain falling in the darkness was that hopefully the front had moved all the way through. Breakfast was again at 06:30 so we all got up early in search of hot water to shower. Depending on your room you had varying success as reports ranged from scalding hot to ice cold with the majority leaning towards the cold end of the spectrum. Regardless, we all were enjoying this adventure so we weren't about to let a few bracing showers put a damper on the trip.

Today's plan was to visit La Hoya, Las Minas and if time allowed a desert habitat. We were heading up into the Pine-Oak forest zone that can be found around 7000 feet. We left at

07:00 and arrived in La Hoya at 08:00. We walked around this wooded area for almost five hours. Almost immediately we came across a few Western Bluebirds, Acorn Woodpeckers and two Grey Silky-flycatchers. As pretty as these two Grey Silkys were, they were but a foreshadowing of what was to come. Three Rufous-Capped Brush-finches were also obliging and then the clouds broke giving way to a partly sunny sky. With this, the birds came to life as we suddenly had groups of 2-4 Grey Silkys all around us, Townsend's, Hermit, Black-throated Green and Crescent-chested Warblers. We kept working the groups of warblers as we came across them to make sure that nothing new was around and to give everyone a chance to see everything. We had glimpses of Hepatic Tanager and Grey-breasted Wood-wren. Mixed in with the warbler flocks were Mexican Chickadees and Yellow-eyed Juncos.

We slowly moved along the trails seeing what was about. Lola and I had worked ahead of the group when we were engulfed by a large group of Black-eared Bushtits. Okay engulfed may be a bit strong but all of a sudden the bushes we were standing near had 30+ Bushtits moving through them in search of food. Following this flock was a group of warblers including another Crescent-chested Warbler. Lola and I again moved ahead of the group and this time we found a group of flowers that was being visited by a good-sized hummingbird. We patiently waiting for the bird to show itself and it was a White-eared Hummingbird. When we told the group what we had they quickly joined us. In fact they may have come too quickly as the hummingbird quickly existed stage left and didn't return until most of the group moved on and its feeding area was again quiet. This same patch of flowers also had three Black-headed Siskins, Brown-throated House Wren and Grey-breasted Wood-wren. This activity quickly dispersed and we followed them which was fortunate as we then were able to get better looks at the siskins, a Bullock's Oriole, Cassin's Vireo and Hutton's Vireo. We then headed back to the bus and came across several female hummingbirds than spawned lots of ID-related discussion and resulted in us concluding that we were pretty sure we had a Rufous, Ruby-throat and Black-chinned hummingbird. We also stumbled across another White-eared Hummingbird and another Slate-throated Redstart.

We continued working our way back to the bus when Russ called out "I see something red". Of course we all jumped to see what he had and were rewarded with our first Red Warbler of the trip. We kept plodding along and by the time we were back at the bus we had come across another nice flock of birds that included Plumbeous Vireo, Hutton's Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and a young Olive Warbler. To quote a friend, "it is neither olive nor a warbler, but what's in a name". It was now time for lunch and the roadside barbecue restaurant we had parked in front of was just the spot. Not only was the food very good but we also had our first House Sparrows of the trip in the parking lot!

At 14:00 we had finished lunch and made a move to the two known Striped Sparrow spots between here and Las Minas. Unfortunately, the weather had turned and we dipped out. We had gone even higher in the mountains, ultimately to almost 10,000 feet and the town of El Conejo and ran into a cold, damp fog. Visibility was poor and such that Bob and Adrian knew that it was senseless to go to Las Minas. We barely had ten feet visibility here and it would only be worse conditions in Las Minas. We would bird around El Conejo until almost 17:00. While conditions were less than desirable, we did get a break in the fog which allowed us to find Golden-crowned Kinglet, Brown Creeper, Curve-billed Thrasher, more Western Bluebirds, Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warblers, Northern Flickers (red-shafted race), Chipping Sparrow, Black-headed Grosbeak, Collared Towhee, a few more Red Warblers, and Orange-crowned Warbler. We had not managed our time well enough to get to the desert habitat but there was a very realistic chance that the heavy weather had settled in there as well. Complicating things was the fact that it was Sunday and the restaurants close early at about 20:00 so we wanted to be seated in El Tio Yeyo at 19:00.

04-October-04 – It was back to an early start as we had lots to do today including returning to Cardel so breakfast was at 06:00 and we loaded up the bus and departed for Finca Hilde-El Mirador at 06:30. El Mirador is an old, family run shade-grown coffee plantation. It has been in the current owner's family for six generations and is a fine mix of coffee, bananas, citrus and native trees. We made a pit stop at a Pemex station near the finca and got a bit way laid by the 50-100 different types of moths that had sought shelter from the evening's rain on the sides of the station's pumps.

We arrived at the finca around 08:45 and once everyone got situated and loaded down with snacks we set off birding as the rain began to dissipate. There were lots and lots of birds all around us as we walked the road into the plantation. We had Montezuma Oropendola, Acorn Woodpeckers, Yellow-winged Tanagers, Baltimore Orioles and two Audubon's Orioles. We also had a pair of Violaceous Trogons when Bob heard a Keel-billed Toucan so we headed off on to a side trail and most of us got on the toucan before it flew off to parts unknown. As we returned to the main road from this side path Jorge, the owner arrived on the scene, proudly handed out checklist for his plantation and suggest that we take a different road that was a bit higher in the forest and might give us a better vantage point to see what was going on. It was an overcast and drizzly morning after all. His pickup truck wasn't big enough to fit all of us at once so we went in two shifts. The shift had a fly over White-collared Swift and a Yellow Cracker perched on a tree trunk.

The first truckload immediately had a good flock of birds in the trees around them. This included Rufous-capped, Black-throated Green, and Wilson's Warblers and the ubiquitous Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. We then had a very cooperative Rusty Sparrow, three Yellow-faced Grassquits and two Indigo Buntings all in the same leafless tree below us on the hillside. Just about this time Jorge returned with the second truckload of people. While the sparrow sat still for everyone to view through a scope, the grassquits flew away. We wandered along the road enjoying the lush habitat. We came across the occasional mixed flock of warblers adding Magnolia, Blue-winged and Nashville to our day list.

We had yet another Violaceous Trogon and at least two Olivaceous Woodcreepers and a Banaquit. Just before noon, Jorge came back up the road with our mid-morning snack. A well-fed birder is a happy birder! He brought with him bananas from the plantation, homemade banana bread and homegrown coffee. While we snacked, he explained about his plantation, its history and the coffee business in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. The farm has been in his family for six generations and it is a wonderful example of a well-established shade-grown coffee plantation. Two-banded and One-pupil Satyrs were around us as well as another beautiful unidentified Satyr. As we started to pack up the leftovers of this treat, a Yellow-olive Flycatcher was spotted. We worked our way through the plantation into the remnant rain forest and had a Hooded Warbler and White-breasted Wood-wren.

We then had to take two "taxi" rides back to the main hacienda for lunch. This time the second group had the better birds. As we waited, we wandered up the road and had wonderful looks at an Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, and quick looks at a Red-throated Ant-tanager. As we were loading up the truck, we heard another White-breasted Wood-wren and a Blue-crowned Mot-mot. Lunch was a veritable feast of rice, beans and three different types of tamales. Once again all hope of eating lightly went by the wayside because this was a delicious home cooked meal.

It was about 14:30 when we finally departed for Cempoala and we arrived there about 15:45. We took a brief tour of the ruins with a local guide. While we didn't really didn't see any new birds, it is always nice to get exposed to the local culture and history. Besides, is there a better way to learn about history than to walk amongst it? Seeing and touching 500-year-old ruins while hearing about Cortez and the Toletcan people was a very pleasant ending to the day. We then loaded up on the bus again and returned to the Hotel Bienvenido in Cardel. After checking in, we returned to La Antigua for dinner and a bit more history

with a visit to the first Catholic church established in the new world. This was another legacy of Cortez in this region. While listening to Eduardo translate our local guide's recounting of the history and significance of the church, several White Ibis and two Lesser Nighthawks flew by. You simply can't keep a group of birders outside without them being distracted by something flying around. Dinner was a seafood banquet at a riverside restaurant.

05-October-04 – We were back to our usual breakfast routine at the Hotel Bienvenido at 06:30 with a 07:00 departure for Las Barrancas. Bob estimated it was a 45-minute drive south with no traffic and on good roads. Unfortunately, the roads were in bad shape and we hit traffic as well as our usual morning rain showers. Our trip to Las Barrancas ended up taking closer to 75 minutes but at least the rain had stopped by the time we arrived and we were soon birding from the roadside of this wetlands area. There was activity all around us and by constantly scanning the small pools, wet fields and grasslands, had both White and White-faced Ibis; Great, Snowy and Cattle Egrets; and all the herons except Black-crowned Night-heron. Working the flooded fields we found lots of Black Terns hawking insects, several Gull-billed Terns, a small group of Black-necked Stilts, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, lots of Northern Jacanas, Blue-winged Teal and Black-bellied Whistling-ducks. There were several kestrels in the area, one immature Snail Kite flew right over our heads and several pairs of Alpomado Falcons.

We continued to work our way down the road away from the highway and came across a pair of Double-striped Thick-Knees or Double-striped Knock-knees as we called them once or twice and a Limpkin. A few 100 feet down the road, we had a group of five Limpkins cross the road. They began to actively feed in the wet meadow area and could be heard barking and grunting whenever our chatter quieted down enough to hear them. Scanning the horizon, we found the first of what would turn out to be 6 or more Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures. We were fortunate enough to have a family group of 4 on the ground so we could study both adult and juvenile birds up close.

We continued our way around the wetlands looking for Pinnated Bittern and eventually found three of them amongst the grasses and sedges. We also found several Mangrove Swallows and a small group of Least Sandpipers in a pasture area. We still had lots of ground to cover as we had to get to the traditional Common Tody-Flycatcher spot and the traditional Pale-breasted Ground-dove spot. Both were far too wet and we dipped out on these species but we were treated to another spectacular display of flycatchers (Vermillion, Fork-tailed, Tropical and Eastern Kingbirds) as well as some of the prettiest Scissor-tails anyone could remember seeing. At one point 20-25 were perched in the same tree. At least one Grassland Yellowfinch flew over us during our visit to Las Barrancas and a variety of butterflies were seen including Orange-banded Longwing, Isabella and Zebra Heliconian, and a Janais Patch.

At 13:45 after a long but very productive morning, we headed back to Cardel and a late lunch. We went back to Chichi at 16:00 and caught a nice flight of 20,000+ raptors in the hour between 16:00-17:00. The majority of the birds were still Broad-wings but a noticeable increase in the number of Turkey Vultures was apparent. At 17:15 we headed back to Cardel to stock up for a picnic dinner at the "bat cave".

It was 18:00 when we headed back toward the Chichi area. In the limestone surrounding the region, there were several caves that serve as winter bat roosts and we were headed to one that was home to an estimated 200,000-500,000 bats. The majority of them are Davy's Naked-backed Bats followed by Peter's Ghost-faced Bats and a few fruit bats. We arrived at dusk and the bats were already beginning to depart for their nocturnal foraging. Dinner was "el fresca" with plenty of beer and wine to drink. It was an amazing experience and as we ate and drank watched a modest but steady stream of bats come out of the cave. After about an hour it was time for desert and Bob and Adrian pulled out a chocolate birthday

cake, complete with candles, for Russ. It was close to 21:30 when we headed back to Cardel with another memorable experience for the trip under our belts.

06-October-04 – Because we had again had 2-3 days of iffy weather, at least for a migrating raptor looking for thermals to ride, we expected another really good hawk flight so we wanted to stay close to Cardel to get back to the hotel by late morning. We planned on an early breakfast 06:00 with an early departure 30 minutes later to the La Mancha Biological Research Station. We arrived at 07:30 and immediately had an immature Common Black Hawk soar through the trees, more White-fronted Parrots and a Squirrel Cuckoo. In the grassy fields by the main gate were a good-sized flock of Blue Grosbeaks, White-collared Seedeaters and Blue-black Grassquits.

We then walked the road to the river mouth and adjacent estuary. Feeding on the edge of the mangroves was a Snowy Egret and a juvenile white morph, Reddish Egret. Feeding in the surf line were a few Willets, Least Sandpipers, and Black-bellied Plovers. We then headed to the forest trail and our main targets here at La Mancha (Black-headed Trogon, Boat-billed Heron and Gray-necked Wood-Rail). As a group we were three for three although only a few lucky folks got to see the wood-rail.

Shortly after entering the forest trail, the front end of the line got to see a Gray-necked Wood-rail scampering up the hillside but as with many tropical birding experiences, the viewing window of opportunity was limited. This was a vivid example of having to be in the right place at the right time. We reached the lagoon a few 100 feet further down the path. The shoreline had lots of Green Herons and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons but we had to search a bit before we found the Boat-billed Herons. We eventually found two (an adult and a juvenile) roosting in the shadows on a clump of vegetation. We had had similar success with a family group of Black-headed Trogons. Mom, dad and junior all perched nicely along a short stretch of the path so we could all see each of them at various times. While enjoying the Boat-billed Herons, a Green Kingfisher was seen making it a four kingfisher trip with the potential for a fifth! We also had a few new butterflies for the trip including a giant owl, Coastal Owl and several Red-bordered Pixies.

We then climbed up on the dunes and could see that it was indeed a good day for migration. A large flock of American White Pelicans was just beginning to gain altitude and the beginnings of another good day along the VRR was observed. At 10:30 we headed back to Cardel and went right up to the hotel's rooftop. While the stream of birds was impressive and steady, it was also well to the east so the birds were not very close. Rather than bake in the sun and look at dots in the sky, we decided to eat lunch downstairs and check to see if the flight path had shifted later in the day. Lunch was slower than normal but by the time we had finished, the winds had shifted and the birds were more or less overhead. They weren't as low as they had been the other day but the flight line had definitely moved. While earlier in the trip the make-up of the flights had been 90% broad-wings it was now 65% broad-wings and 30% Turkey Vultures. There were a few more Swainson's Hawks in the kettles but the large Swainson flight was still overdue.

We again ran into Kirk and Louise Moulton and since the last time our paths crossed he had learned how the count is completed. Each site has 2 people counting raptors and one person tabulating the numbers and keeping the other data. Each counter gets on a stream of birds and starts counting until the stream runs out. Only then do they start on another stream. They each count separate streams and if more than two lines of birds are coming by at the same time, one may go un-counted. This could explain why we felt more birds were flying by than were being counted. However, this is the technique they have used year after year so the consistency of their method stands up.

At 14:30 we started to make a move to go to Chichi and by 15:00 we were actually on the bus headed there. The raptors were still streaming by along with flocks of Wood Storks and

American White Pelicans. There were a few more Swainson's in these flights, two Zone-tails and a few Short-tailed Hawks. Some of us decided to take a last look for the Mexican Sheartail and carried our chairs over to the flower patch they had been frequenting. We were rewarded with outstanding looks at both male and female sheartails and a Buff-bellied hummer.

Besides our group, groups from Hawk Mountain, Hawk Watch International and some others had come to Chichi this afternoon. All of a sudden, Maria Haldemann called out "EAGLE" and everyone snapped to attention. After much questioning, discussion and debate over field marks seen and not seen we all agreed that we had just watched the 5th Golden Eagle of the season pass-by. This turned out to be our second straight 150,000+ raptor day. We left for the hotel and dinner at 18:00. For a change of pace we went to a restaurant across the zocalo. It turned out to be a very good day even if at times it might have seemed a bit slow. Had we already become complacent to the wonders of the VRR? More than likely we were just slightly overwhelmed at our good fortune to have had three such wonderful hawk flight days. As I have said before, "Nothing is as good as a hawk watch or sea watch on a good day. Conversely, nothing is as bad as a bad day at one of these watch sights".

07-October-04 – It was time to leave Cardel again and head south to Catemaco. We went northwest first to try for Sumichrast Wren. This meant an early wake-up call and departure. Breakfast was at 05:15 and we loaded up the two 15-passenger vans and headed out. Our stop for the wren proved interesting it not exactly successful. The trail was very muddy and slippery from all the recent rain and rather steep and rocky. We started up around 08:15 and while we did hear the wren call as well as a Thicket Tinamou call, we never saw either. There were some fleeting looks at Keel-billed Toucan, Collared Aracari and Fan-tailed Warblers for some of the group and more of the various warblers we had been seeing at each and every locality. The hike up the trail was not completely in vain as we all did get Blue-crowned Mot-mot. It was close to 11 when we had returned to the vans and it was decided to have lunch then before pushing off to Catemaco. Heck we had been awake long enough for it to seem like lunchtime! Around 11:30 we were headed towards Catemaco with a planned stop at the Alvarado Wetlands area to break up the drive.

We made it to Alvarado a little after 14:00 as traveling through the Veracruz area can be slow as the good roads aren't really that good, the bad roads are bad and every town has lots of speed bumps that you want to take seriously or risk concussions from bouncing of the roof of your car. The wetlands were wetter than they had been on previous trip thanks to all the recent rain. Still we had been very fortunate to juggle our birding plans to avoid the worst of the weather. We had a few more Mangrove Swallows and at least five Roadside Hawks, lots of herons, egrets and Northern Jacanas. We continued onto Catemaco picking up the occasional raptor here and there including a pair of White-tailed Kites hovering over a meadow. We arrived at Nanciyaga close to 16:30 and immediately went to work finding Ruddy Crake. We had quick success in calling in about 5 of these crakes in two separate locations. The first location was the boat landing and the second was a short way up the path. This apparently is one of the better places in the world to see this species. While at the boat landing, we got to watch three Howler Monkeys feeding in the treetops. While here we also found Kentucky Warblers, White-breasted Wood-wrens, Red-throated Ant-tanager, Spot-breasted Wren and a pleasantly productive two-hour walk.

We were then off to Playa Azul for dinner and a shot at Mottled Owl. They live on the grounds so chances were good we could dig them up. After dinner we gave the owls a try but they wanted no part of us so we would have to try again in the morning or tomorrow night. Tomorrow we were headed to the UNAM Biological Station so breakfast was at 05:30. The plan was to bird the rain forest around the station in the morning, come down to Laguna Sontecomapan for another boat trip in the early afternoon, have dinner by the river

and return to the station at dusk for Black and White Owls. Of course if we could find the owls in the daylight we wouldn't have to return.

08-October-04 – Yet another early start with a 06:00 departure to maximize our time at the station. Prior to leaving we looked for the Mottled Owl that we heard calling in the trees behind the kitchen. Unfortunately it wouldn't respond to our calls and was too well hidden to be seen. Because the rains had made the rough road up to the station even rougher than usual the trip took close to 90 minutes. We stopped on the road to overlook the valley for Keel-billed Toucan and White Hawk. We had one distant toucan but before we could put a scope on it, it flew and no White Hawk was to be seen here. While scanning the valley and watching for movement on the hillside above us a few Red-lored Parrots flew in and perched nicely.

Since we were already "loosing light" we moved up the road and pulled inside the gates and started looking for birds. While some of us went searching for a banos, others of us started looking for the two Black and White Owls we had been told were roosting right by the car park. Adrian found them right away and a not only had we found a major target species but we didn't have to make a second trip up that bouncy road. Yippee!! Scopes were set up, cameras were clicking and the owls just sat their oblivious to us. Not to be ignored, there were lots of other birds around the car park area including Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet, Collared Trogon, Olive-backed Euphonias, orioles and warblers.

By now the banos situation had been resolved and Bob thought he heard a Stub-tailed Spadebill just up the path from us. It was time to make a move and we were able to track down the spadebill. While chasing down the spadebill we heard an interesting/different call. It took a few minutes but we eventually found the vocalist and it turned out to be a Ruddy Woodcreeper. This was a first for a Jaeger Tour to Veracruz and totally unexpected in this area. We continued to bird the grounds of the station and came across a flower patch that was being frequented by a Little Hermit, Long-tailed Hermit and White-bellied Emerald. Everyone got on the emerald, most of us on the Little Hermit and only a few of us saw the Long-tailed Hermit, as it never made a return trip to the flowers. While waiting for the hummers to return we watched a Wolf Spider (tarantula) and had lots of raptors soaring overhead including: a possible hawk-eagle, a Short-tailed Hawk, two Common Black Hawks, Peregrine Falcons and both Turkey and Black Vultures. We also had a White Hawk overhead that resulted in a series of oohs and aahs from everyone.

We then made a short walk into the forest but again the path was rather slippery and since it was very quiet we saw no reason to spend a great deal of time on it. We returned to the vans for an early lunch but not without first having not one but *TWO* White Hawks soaring low overhead with a blue sky and fluffy white clouds as a background. This was a trip highlight for several of us! We birded along the road picking up Lesser Greenlet and a Harmony Daggerwing and took yet another look at the owls while the picnic was being prepared.

About 12:30 we headed back down the road to our boat trip on Laguna Sontecomapan. It took about an hour to get there and by the time we had sorted out the arrangements it had started to rain. We again split the group up into two boats and each group was going to go up a different river then return to the laguna before going up the other group's river. We tried to bird with the canopy down but decided it was going to be easier to put the tops back up. The rain stopped after less then 20 minutes and the canopy came back down. Long-legged waders were everywhere on our river as well as several Common Black Hawks including a juvenile perched on a branch overhanging the river. We had a small group of orioles that contained two Yellow-tailed Orioles in it. We also had several Violet Sabrewings (one of the trips targets) but we had so far dipped out on the other targets (Bare-throated

Tiger-heron, Gray-headed Kite, Sungrebe and Pygmy Kingfisher). We did have several Jesus Christ (Basilisk) lizards and a large Green Iguana.

After about 45 minutes we turned around to go to the other river. At the river mouth we saw the other boat and they radioed us that they had a Gray-necked Wood-rail on the bank. We killed the engine and backed off at which point we had a Pygmy Kingfisher streak by and take refuge in a dense, dense overhang. We never got on the wood-rail and continued up this channel without anything new except for a few Red-winged Blackbirds. We never saw the Barred Antshrike or Gray-crowned Yellowthroat that the other boat had here. We returned to the boat landing about 15 minutes prior to the other boat. They had a fly-by tiger-heron and that was about it.

We then headed back to Playa Azul for dinner as we didn't have to return to UNAM for Black and White Owls and the restaurant we had planned to eat at was closed. Our early return to the hotel at approximately 18:00 allowed people to get cleaned up for dinner, bird the grounds, check out the pool (Ebbe at least took a quick swim) or grab a beer or two before dinner (Adrian and myself). Adrian also used this time to put together a slide show of his pictures. Ah the wonders of digital cameras and laptop computers! After dinner most people went back to their rooms to pack and catch some sleep. Kate and Sandra had heard the Mottled Owls calling in the garden behind the office and had one fly into Kate's call but they didn't have a torch to spotlight it. Adrian and I also heard the owls calling after we left the dining room about 21:30 and after about 30 minutes had coaxed one into view near the entrance gate. We didn't see any light on in our group's rooms but did see Chris Wood and two of his field trip participants so they joined us looking at the owl and trying to photograph it. Around 22:30 we all had had enough and went back to our rooms.

09-October-04 – Today we were leaving Playa Azul and heading to Veracruz for the last night of the trip. Breakfast was at 06:00 and we all brought our packed bags to the office so that we could leave for the cloud forest in Ruiz Cortinez promptly at 06:30. We didn't hear the Mottled Owl calling this morning so most of the group would have to have been satisfied with having heard it the day before.

In the awaking morning light we made our way from the hotel to Ruiz Cortinez but not without dodging cattle, cats, dogs, chickens and Mexican cowboys along the road. Coupled with a recently washed out bridge, a rutted roadway and a road crew intent on making the most of a Saturday morning. Finally around 08:30 made it to Ruiz Cortinez although we had started birding en route. The first van had already started birding as they had Barn Owl, Slaty-breasted Tinamou and Blue-crowned Mot-mot fly through their headlights or scurry off the road as they got near.

We birded up in this cloud forest for about 3 hours. One of the first sights we enjoyed were 100s and 100s of tiny yellow and black moths all over the roadside. They must have recently hatched out. At one of our first stops, Edie had the misfortune of stepping on an ant nest while looking at Klug's and Leila's Clearwings nectaring on a flower head. While these weren't fire ants, they did bite quite fiercely and she quickly sought some privacy in one of the vans while she dealt with the "ants in her pants". This forest was wonderful habitat as we birded along the roadside and in some of the side trails. If only the sun had come out we might have had a spectacular visit here. As it was we picked up another Rusty Sparrow, several Long-tailed Sabrewings, and White-bellied Emerald. We split into two groups so one group could walk the road while the other checked out a side trail. The group that went on the side trail picked up Speckled-throated Foliage-gleaner and Common Bush-Tanagers. The group that headed down the road wasn't as lucky so we switched routes. They got the foliage-gleaner and the group now working along the road got a Plain Xenops and Golden-browed Warbler. When they returned to the road they also managed to pick these up. Kate had picked up a large cecropia leaf that was working as a good luck charm so

she carried it as both a totem and natural umbrella against the mist that hung in the air. The two groups ultimately rejoined and we continued along the road and picked up another small flock of warblers that included a young male Red-legged Honeycreeper. About 11:30 we headed back down the road on the way to Veracruz. We stopped for lunch at Restaurant El Amate before pushing off again.

A quick stop at the Alvarado Wetlands provided us with much better looks at Snail Kites, long-legged waders including another Limpkin, Aplomado Falcon eating a dragonfly and a Yellow-headed Vulture. We arrived in Veracruz and the Hotel Colonial at approximate 17:00. We checked into our rooms and cleaned up before wandering the zocalo and meeting for drinks before having a good-bye dinner. Being a good field trip leader, Adrian scouted out a bar that served Negra Modelo (the official beer of this trip) and we settled in. Little did we know that it was "2 for 1" on Saturday nights but just like dumb luck sometimes results in good birds, we weren't complaining about this unexpected stroke of good fortune. After hoisting a few cold ones, we headed across the zocalo to a restaurant for our good-bye meal. Afterwards we went through the checklist for the last time in the hotel's lobby before heading up to the rooms for a few hours sleep.

The final species count for the trip was 324 including birds heard only, seen by only one participant, one-hit-wonders or those seen by the 100s if not 1000s. We had three very, very good days of raptor watching with a day of over 350,000 raptors counted and two other days of 150,000+ birds seen. This was Adrian's 5th trip down here for the VRR and hands down this was the best raptor flight he had seen. Our species list included 36 warblers, 27 diurnal raptors (hawks, eagles and falcons), 18 hummingbirds, 5 kingfishers, 4 owls and 3 vultures. We also had a good diversity of butterflies, reptiles and a few mammals.

10-October-04 – Today we headed for home. Gary and Ebbe had a later departure than the rest of us so we all said our good-byes to them the night before. Otherwise a bleary-eyed group of satisfied and tired birders met in the lobby of the Hotel Colonial in Veracruz for breakfast at 04:45. We loaded up the vans one last time and headed to the Aeroporta. We checked in and worked through some minor confusion as a few participants didn't have their exit cards readily available but at least none of us were asked to pay our exit tax. Bob had managed to find coffee for us to take home which was a very pleasant and appreciated parting gift to receive at the aeroporta. Once we landed in Houston, we started to say our final good-byes as we began to go our separate ways after clearing customs. Hopefully everyone's trip home was as uneventful as the trip had been memorable and enjoyable. Although the primary attraction for visiting Veracruz in the fall is the River of Raptors (which we certainly saw in wonderful fashion on at least three occasions), we all came on this trip for different reasons and went home a very contented group.