



VERACRUZ, MEXICO

"The River of Raptors"

September 25 – October 6, 2005

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Trip report written by Adrian Binns

Day 1 / Sept 25 – Playa Chalchihuecan; Cardel Bienvenido rooftop;

We weren't even all out of the bus and there was a Collared Forest Falcon as well as a Laughing Falcon calling. On this occasion they eluded us, but not before giving it a good crack. Altimara's Oriole's seemed to be everywhere as were Brown Jay's, Grove-billed Anis, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and Tropical Kingbirds and we got our first crack at separating Kiskadee, Social and Boat-billed Flycatchers. Amongst the migrant passerines, we had a Yellow-bellied and Least Flycatcher, good numbers of Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers, Yellow Warblers and a single Wilson's, Tree, Barn, Rough-wing and Cliff Swallow, several dozen Eastern Kingbirds and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers as well as individual Dickcissel's, best identified by call. A group of 10 Black-crowned Night Herons flew over as did large numbers of Cattle Egrets and fewer numbers of White Ibis and Great Egrets. Walking along the road through this coastal scrub towards the gulf we also picked up a male Canvinet's Emerald, several Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, a family group of Black-headed Saltators, female Rose-throated Becards, Yellow-breasted Chats, White-tipped Dove, Band-backed Wrens, Scrub Euphonias as well as Inca Dove and both ground doves, Common and Ruddy. Reaching the Australian Pines at the end of the road we were treated to great looks at a Squirrel Cuckoo and an immature Grey Hawk. Other raptors along the road included 5 Northern Harriers, Sharp-shinned Hawk and an Aplomado Falcon. We reached the beach mid morning and picked up half a dozen Sandwich Terns in the breakers, Osprey's and 2 Whimbrels. Returning to the bus, we noticed a Broad-wing kettle that quickly became more and more and more until we realized that this 'river' was huge. For as far as we follow the birds back into the clouds they kept coming, at one stage forming a massive kettle. 25 minutes and an estimated 35 thousand Broadwings later it was over.....but not for long. Returning to our hotel rooftop the show continued through the lunch hours. Though maybe not quite as impressive it was certainly nice to have group after group of 2 to 5

thousand plus come through. 2 Hook-billed Kite, 20 plus Mississippi Kites, and about 8 Zone-tailed Hawks added to the excitement.

Mid afternoon we headed to La Antigua and paid a visit to the oldest and probably one of the smallest catholic church in the Americas and followed this with a stroll along the towns cobbled streets to the remains of Cortez home, built in 1519 with eth only remaining walls still standing thanks to century old strangler figs. For 2 and a half hours we relaxed on the river as we searched a side tributary for kingfishers though only coming up with a Ringed, but did get Yellow-crowned Night Herons, Green Heron, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Baltimore Oriole and Red-winged Blackbirds along the water hyacinth and fisherman lined channel. Heading out to the gulf, Black-crowned Night Herons were common as were Barn and Rough-wing Swallows. We had a fine assortment of egrets and herons, including a Tri-colored. Brown pelican and Laughing Gulls were numerous towards the mouth, many seen loafing on exposed low tide spits along with Black Skimmer, Royal, Caspian, Gull-billed and Sandwich Terns which we were able to get close to when our boat cut the engine and pushed us quietly closer. Waders included Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Curlew, Short-billed Dowitcher, Western Willets, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs. Spotted Sandpipers dotted the banks and we watched an Aplomado chase a Barn Swallow before the swallow gave him the slip. A final stop near the mouth allowed us to get out and search the rubbish strewn beach for small plovers. Large numbers of Semi-palmateds were soon found and amongst them our target species the Collared Plover, of which there we had about half a dozen. The seafood restaurant next to the boat landing was an excellent choice and way to end a marvelous first day.

Day 2 / Sept 26 – Johnny Angel Beach; Cerro Gordo; University of Veracruz, Los Largos

We awoke to a great deal of lightening and thunder, most of which seemed to be off shore, and a little rain, just enough to keep us inside the restaurant at Johnny Angel for a while. At least from here we could see the estuary and picked out Little Blue Herons, Snowy Egret, Willets, a Short-billed Dowitcher, Sanderling, Royal and Sandwich Terns, one Black Skimmer and the dullest of shorebirds that after a little working out turned out to be a couple of Red Knots. Once the rain had subsided we ventured out towards the rubbish tip on the edge of the scrub. We were alerted to all kinds of chattering and found a small Boa that drew the attention of Rufous-naped Wrens, Yellow-breasted Chat, and a female Cardinal. The rubbish strewn area that can only be described as a dump site produced a juvenile Grey Hawk, Fork-tailed Flycatchers, Tropical Kingbirds, a small fall out of Yellow Warblers, 4 Lark Sparrows, Wilson's Snipe and a pair of Vermillion Warblers. As we left we spotted Wilson Snipe, Great Egrets, Blue-winged Teal and White Ibis.

At Cerro Gordo we walked the tarmac road which was only in use to a police vehicle and a herdsman with cows. Finally the sun broke through and we had good numbers of butterflies including Red Rims and a Violet-washed Banner. Blue-black Grassquits were common in the tall grasses along with a female Varied Bunting. The small trees that

lined the road held both Brown-crested and Great-crested Flycatchers, Northern Beardless Tyrannulets, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and a couple of Black-crested Titmouse. A male Canivet's Emerald perched out in the open briefly but luckily kept returning to the same perch for all of us to view. A couple of Buff-bellied Hummingbirds were picking off insects in the crown of a Gumbo Limbo and we had both Red-billed Pigeons and Montezuma Oropendula's flying across the lush valley.

A stop at the Xalapa University produced the ubiquitous Wilson's Warblers, Yellow-winged Tanagers and Social Flycatchers along with close looks at a female Summer Tanager and Baltimore Oriole.

Day 3 / Sept 27 – Macuiltepetl Park; Xalapa Museum of Anthropology; Xico Falls

Set high on the hill overlooking Xalapa is the very popular Macuiltepetl Park. One of the first birds we heard was a Bearded Partridge as we came across Clay-colored Robins, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls and Golden-crowned Warblers. Azure-crowned and Berylline Hummingbirds flitted about the flowers and we were appalled to see a White-naped Brush-finch feeding a Bronze Cowbird. Perched high on bare branches were Olive-sided Flycatchers and Western Pewee while lower down Squirrel Cuckoos walked the mid canopy branches. Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Scrub Euphonias, House Finches, Green and Brown Jays, Boat-billed Flycatchers and a Hermit Warbler along with Chestnut-capped Brush-finches were also seen.

Heading down into the caldera we encountered a small warbler flock including Black-and-white, Black-throated Greens, Golden-browed and Golden-crowns before we were fixated for 15 minutes on a large puddle in the path near the bottom of the caldera that had bathing Clay-colored Robins, Blue-wing Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Blue Mockingbird and a pair of Chestnut-capped Brush Finch.

A juvenile Mottled Owl was found being mobbed by Social Flycatchers and a short distance further along the path we found a parent and an older youngster. Three vireos, Cassin's, Blue-headed and Warbling rounded out a great morning. This is one of the better places to see butterflies and there was no shortage of them with Square-tipped Crescents, sisters, Red-striped and Pale Leafwings, Karwinski's Beauty, Orange Mapwing, Faded Eighty-eights, Black Swallowtails, Narrow-banded Dartwhite, Star Satyr, Mountain Longwings and Mexican Silverspots.

Following an hour inside the wonderful Anthropological Museum in Xalapa, we headed to Xico Falls arriving late afternoon. A pair of Bat Flacons were our first find at Xico, with 2 birds perched a good distance away on wires. Both oropendulas, Chestnut-headed and Montezuma's, were present in good numbers and while studying the difference between the two a group of 7 White-crowned Parrots flew into the same tree, with 2 of them alighting near the top of good looks. Late afternoon is a good time for swifts swirling about before heading into the crevices that line the waterfalls and cliffs, and amongst the White-collared we picked out a couple of Chestnut-collared. As we headed back to the bus we came across some birds that briefly landed in the top of a tree and

included a pair of uncommon White-winged Tanagers, Rufous-capped Warblers and a Baltimore Oriole. A few butterflies including morphos, Marina patches and numerous Anna's Eighty-eights.

Day 4 / Sept 28 – Las Minas; Los Humeros (Joshua Tree)

This morning we climbed several thousand feet to Las Minas an area of pine-oak forest at about 7000'. As we walked the gravel road the mist seemed to lift giving us some extraordinary views of the gorge and valley below. Gray-breasted Wood Wrens were rather uncooperative as we stood only feet above them and watched them go back and forth in the underbrush and taunt us with vocalizations. Garnet-throated Hummingbird, Hairy Woodpecker, Golden-browed and Black-throated Green Warbler and Slaty-breasted Redstarts were found along this stretch of road. At the bend in the road we did come across a very nice mixed flock that kept us enthralled for a while that included Black-and-whites, Townsend, Golden-browed, Crescent-chested and Red Warblers, Common Bush Tanagers, Hutton's Vireo, a Russet Nightingale Thrush and Brown-backed Solitaire. A buteo flew overhead, which turned out to be a Short-tailed Hawk. Turning our attention to the other side of the road we located a couple of Red Warblers and Slate-throated Redstarts along with a flock of Bushtits, Stellar's Jay a Brown-throated Wren and a Collared Towhee.

One final stop on the way out was at an old sand quarry where Striped Sparrows were the stars as they sat up on shrubs for all to see. Lesser Goldfinches and Sharpie also put in an appearance.

Dropping in elevation we had lunch at a restaurant near Los Humeros, an area of Century Plants, Joshua Trees, junipers, pines and wildflowers. This new (to our tour and unique habitat produced a whole new range of species including Orange-crowned warblers, Western Scrub Jays, Black-chinned, Rufous and Lucifer's Hummingbirds. Black-chinned Sparrows proved to be sulkers while Western Tanager, Scott's Oriole and Curve-billed Thrasher were seen at some distance.

Day 5 / Sept 29 – La Joya; Bienvenido Rooftop; Zempoala

It was a marvelously clear and refreshing morning that produced excellent looks a wonderful variety of birds amongst the pines at La Joya from Plumbeous Vireos to two juvenile Ruddy-capped Nightingale Thrushes that sat up for us a few feet off the ground and against the base of a large tree. In between we had a mixed flock of warblers that included Olive, Hermit, Wilson's, Black-throated Green, Townsend, Crescent-chested and MacGillivray's. White-eared Hummingbirds put in brief appearances and in the upper reaches of the canopy Greater Pewee, Hepatic Tanagers, White-breasted Nuthatch, Black-headed Siskins, Red Crossbill, Acorn Woodpecker, Mexican Chickadees and a slew of Grey Silkies. Two good finds were a Russet Nightingale Thrush and a sulking Collared Towhee.

By late morning we were back on the rooftop at our hotel in Cardel where we had small kettles of 10-20 Broadwings, the beginning of Turkey Vulture migration with about 60 birds and 7 other raptors, including 11 Cooper's, 2 Peregrines and individual Hook-billed Kite, Merlin, Common Black Hawk and White-tailed Kite. As the migration seemed slow we took advantage of the lull and visited the ruins at Zempoala for the remainder of the afternoon. Half the group opted for the guided tour with Bob acting as translator, and the rest joined me as worked our way around the vegetated perimeter. The usual common species were about including Blue-grey and Yellow-winged Tanagers, Melodious Blackbirds, Great-tailed Grackles, Altamira Oriole Ruddy Ground Dove, Wilson's Warbler, Scrub Euphonia and yes, Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, which enjoying calling during daylight hours, making some of them rather easy to find, and today was no exception. Yellow-throated Warblers are easy to find here amongst the palm trees and we came across Hooded Warbler, Bronzed Cowbird and noisy Black-headed Saltators.

Day 6 / Sept 30 – La Mancha; Bienvenido Rooftop; Chichicaxtle; Bat Cave

The wetland and coastal scrub at La Mancha was full of activity first thing in the morning. Least Sandpipers, Semi-palmated and Black-bellied Plovers, Black-necked Stilts, Little Blue Heron and Snowy Egrets were on the lagoons sandy edge while Black-crowned Night Herons remained on the edge of the mangroves and Royal and Sandwich Tern flew to the pilings at the far end of the lagoon. The best find here was a Buff-breasted Sandpiper that showed well. The grassy areas near the biological station held Blue Grosbeaks; the edge had a roving gang of Band-backed Wrens, Brown Jays, Kiskadees, Vermillion Flycatchers and overhead we could hear Dickcissels on the move as well as seeing a Common Black Hawk leave its roost. Along the path that leads through the mangroves and scrub forest we encountered White-bellied Wren, White-eyed Vireos and Black-headed Trogons. The lagoon, now thankfully cleared of water lettuce had Northern Jacana's, good numbers of Yellow-crowned Night Herons and a couple of Least Grebes, but we could not find any Boat-billed Herons. On the coastal dunes there was resident dark-morph Short-tailed Hawk flying about and we caught sight of Montezuma Oropendulas flying along the ridge. In the trees along the ridge a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet began calling and was soon picked up and Great-crested Flycatchers sat out in the open for us. A juvenile Great Black Hawk was also seen as was a small movement of south bound Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. Walking back along the path through the vegetation we came across an Ovenbird and a few of the more common warblers, namely Hooded and Wilson's. Heading out on the dirt road towards the main road we made a couple of stops for two very cooperative Aztec Parakeets, male American Redstarts and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks.

Back on the rooftop for lunch there were small flights of broadwings very high up. We get to see a kettle of about 75 Anhingas and about 20 Mississippi Kite's passed through. With the flight heading inland we took off for Chichi but it never really materialized, as they only counted about 4 thousand for the day, whereas Cardel had 6 times that. It was all around a very slow raptor day. We did however get to see a dark morph Broadwing amongst a kettle of 100 plus birds.

This evening we paid a visit to a bat cave in the middle of a cornfield. As the final stretch of the road was too narrow for the bus, we had to walk the final ½ mile. A Roadside Hawk was very vocal and we came across a number of Altimara, Orchard and Baltimore Orioles. We set up our picnic dinner in front of the cave entrance and began our meal. At 7:10 an Aplomado Falcon showed up, patrolling the corn field in search for a final meal before settling down for the night. 5 minutes later the first of an estimated ¼ of a million bats would emerge and we watched in astonishment and awe as the falcon showed off all of its hunting skills as it chased, twisted and turned, hovered and finally caught the bat....all of this right in front of us, and took it to a tree to eat it. Ten minutes later a juvenile showed up and just before it began to get dark a second and third bat emerged. On this day it was not good to be one of the first bats out of the cave. Both birds successfully picked off these bats before calling it a day and leaving the rest of the bats to go and hunt. While we finished up our picnic dinner under the milky way and with Mars and Jupiter showing well, the bats mainly consisting of Davy's naked-backed and Peter's Ghost-faced, began to stream up building in numbers as it progressively got darker. Their flight path took them in front of us and around the corn stalks at the corner of the field and on a low trajectory into the night. At 8:30 our taxi (a pick up truck) showed up, we loaded the tables, chairs and half the group and the rest waited till the taxi returned from dropping the first group off at the bus. It was not long before we were all together and on our way back to the hotel following a wonderful evening.

Day 7 / Oct 1 – El Mirador; Bienvenido Rooftop

Heading west into the mountain foothills with a stunning backdrop of the snow capped Pico de Orizaba at first morning light, we saw 2 Parakeets take off from the asphalt and even had a first for the trip to Veracruz, a Brazilian Rabbit better known as a Tapiti. We had an excellent morning walking the dirt roads of the El Mirador shade coffee plantation. Beginning with Audubon's Orioles on the brilliant orange blossoms of African tulip tree also known as the Flame Tree, Wedge-tailed Sabrewing and Azure-crowned Hummingbirds all over the place and a Masked Tityra perched in the open at top a tree. The activity continued at a feverish pace on the west end of the property with a large group of Common Bush Tanagers; a Fan-tailed Warbler seen well by several participants; Yellow-breasted Chat; loads of Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers; a Yellow-billed Cuckoo; Bat falcon; Tropical Parula and great looks at a Louisiana Waterthrush, which allowed us to compare it with the Northern's that we had already seen. A short distance away we came across a mixed flock that included stunning looks at a pair of Rufous-capped Warblers; Black-throated Green Warblers in all plumages; a female Black-and-white; Wilson's Warbler; White-eyed as well as Yellow-throated Vireo and then Yellow-olive Flycatcher which we followed for some distance before it took off deep into the plantation. This was followed by several Bananaquits, one of which was nest building, Blue-winged Warbler, Dusky-capped Flycatcher and a pair of Olivaceous Woodcreepers which showed extremely well. By this point we had reached the next path we were to take and here the activity centered around one tree with numerous Azure-crowned Hummingbirds and Wedge-tailed Sabrewing's taking center stage and having a supporting cast of Common Bush Tanagers and a Golden-crowned Warbler. The final

leg of our walk added Greater Pewee, Violaceous Trogon, Scrub Euphonia and a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, before piling into the farm truck and being herded to the bus. One cannot forget the marvelous variety of butterflies that accompanied our birding on this bright and sunny morning. They included Zebra, Tiger, Mountain and Crimson-patched Longwing, Rusty-tipped page, Blue-fronted Catone, Klug's Clearwing, and a fine assortment of Satyr's.

Lunch was taken on the rooftop of the hotel and while the mid day hours were slow, the flights of Broad-wings picked up by 2 pm and over the following 3 hours over 100,000 birds had been counted. Finally what had surely been held up by Hurricane Rita was beginning to show up. Though most were high in the sky we certainly did get our fair share of good views of the raptors. What was noticeably different from past years was that the afternoon flight seemed to be heading southeast towards the coast. A few Swainson's were picked out, as well as a good showing of Peregrine's and Mississippi Kites. Both accipiters, single Northern Harrier's, Zone-tailed Hawks and a White-tailed Kite rounded out a great show.

After a fine buffet dinner we enjoyed a talk by Carole Griffiths of the potential future categorization and separation of raptor families and orders.

Day 8 / Oct 2 – La Fortuna; Bienvenido Rooftop; Chichicaxtle; Rio Escondido

After several loud blasts from the bus' horn the owner of the Fortuna Ranch met Bob at the locked gate where a lively debate took place even while the owner turned his back to relieve himself. It was lucky for Bob that they had already shaken hands. Anyway the conversation broke off when the owner headed back to the house and Bob back to the bus. The good news was there was no problem at all and he was just going to get the key.....but not before finishing his breakfast!

The activity around the seasonal freshwater pond was bustling with White Ibis, both Night-Herons, an assortment of egrets and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks going back and forth. Several Anhingas perched quietly while Amazon, Ringed and Belted made considerable noise as they criss-crossed the pond occasionally successfully diving for fish. Amongst the Blue-winged Teal there were individual Green-winged Teal and Shoveler as well as 3 Cinnamon Teal. Pied-billed Grebe and Least Grebe both showed well as did a family of Jacanas while a Moorhen flew some 30 yards over the rushes and dropped out of sight. A Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, several small groups of White-winged Doves and all ages of Vermillion Flycatchers, Common Yellowthroat and Northern Waterthrushes were all seen. We could see that small kettles of raptors were rising from the woods around us, so we headed back to Cardel in the hopes of getting a good flight.

The rooftop was hoping throughout the lunchtime hours with never ending lines of birds and vortex's rising for hundreds of feet – we had hit the “river of raptors”. Though it started out along the coastal dunes they came closer to the hotel as the winds shifted slightly pushing them further inland. A Hook-billed Kite, several Peregrines, a Northern Harrier and about half a dozen Swainson's including a dark morph added to the

excitement. The official count between 11 and 12 was over 35,000 broad-wings and 10,000 Turkey Vultures followed by over 20,000 in the next hour. We all felt that the count was very low, but then again none of us do this every day. From here it was onto to Chichicaxtle 5 miles west of town where the numbers continued to pile up. Overall the produce a quarter of a million birds, the largest number to date this season. The narrow flower bank between the football field and the sugar cane fields was watched carefully for over an hour and a half producing good looks at a Buff-bellied Hummingbird and the briefest of views of a female Mexican Shearwater. The inactivity no doubt due to a steady wind that certainly made it favorable for the raptors but not the resident passerines.

Only a short distance away is Rio Escondido (hidden river valley) where we did get to see the tail end of the day's migration with several large kettles of several thousand birds. Blue-black Grassquits were common as well as being vocal; an Altamira Oriole was perched nicely as was a female Indigo Bunting and our target bird the Grey-crowned Yellowthroat did produce a good view for several in the group before disappearing into the tall grass.

Day 9 / Oct 3 – Las Barrancas; Tlacotalpan tollbooth; Nanciyaga

Following an early breakfast we left the north and headed for Catemaco in the south first stopping in the grasslands at Las Barrancas. By daybreak we realized that the forecasted change in weather was coming true with very overcast skies. The birding was excellent with flocks of White-faced Ibis and Neotropic Cormorants flying over. The occasional Dickcissel was heard and seen and we even heard our only Killdeer of the trip. Crested Caracaras perched in palm trees and flew over the large meadows while 3 Aplomado Falcon hung around the west end with one making a light hearted attempt to harass a Limpkin. Double-striped Thick-knees were seen in record numbers with over 20 in various spots, some even dodging the cattle as they moved through and Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures quartered the grasslands low as they are known to do. A single Pinnated Bittern was a great find as it stalked the perimeter of the pond picking off frogs. A single Mangrove Swallow was on a wire besides a Vermillion Flycatcher and Inca Dove. A large body of marsh produced a Jacana with young, Blue-winged Teal and a Purple Gallinule while a very small small grove of trees held Ruby-throated Hummingbird, male, female and immature Green-breasted Mango, Northern Parula, Common Tody Flycatcher and 2 pairs of Bobwhite Quail. The later well sheltered on a post and tree branches in the lee side of the wind. From here we stopped briefly at the northern end of the Alvarado Wetlands near the Tlacotalpan tollbooth where Osprey and Great Black Hawk were perched and a male Snail Kite flew beside the vans looking for apple snails in the wet ditches.

Following lunch besides the river in the historic town of Tlacotalpan where Green Herons, Mangrove Swallows and Laughing Gulls were active along the river, we continued south. A flock of about 20 Black Terns were spotted flying in unison up the river, likely as a result of the windy conditions. By mid afternoon as we neared Catemaco it had begun to rain and as we pulled into our hotel it had picked up. With one more stop planned we quickly settled in and then headed the short distance to

Nanciyaga. Unfortunately by the time we got there the rain picked up, but we were still able to pick up Ringed and Green Kingfisher, Keel-billed Toucan, Collared Aracari, Kentucky Warbler and hear Ruddy Crane.

After dinner in town, where the garlic Talapia was out of this world we checked the internet to get the latest on tropical storm Stan which was heading in our direction. With two major sites and the Mexico satellite showing that a Hurricane warning had been posted for some of the Veracruz coast and with the projected path heading towards Veracruz City at 7mph with an expected landfall of Wednesday evening, we decided that it would be best to head away from any possible danger in the morning.

Day 10 / October 4 – Catemaco to Hidalgo

The morning news mentioned that Stan had picked up speed and was still several hundred kilometers away and barreling down on Veracruz City, 200 kilometers to our north and predicted to hit later today or early Wednesday morning. After breakfast we took the southern road out of town that would lead us inland and away from the coast, with an eventual goal of reaching safety in Mexico City. We theorized that any storm surge would likely render the Catemaco to Veracruz road useless and why would we want to head into the storm. The drive was slow, as the winds had picked up and there was a considerable amount of limbs, leaves and trees blown over. At times the rains picked up, typical of the bands of rains associated with hurricanes. A every fallen trees that straddled the road the locals and their machetes and the occasional chainsaw were doing a yeoman's job clearing enough of a width for vehicles to pass by. In one spot we came to halt and waited 5 to 10 minutes to get through. It was not that a vehicle could not get through, it was that the workers wanted to be paid and no one was willing to come with the money. I pulled out 20 pesos and we were on our way. The journey was very slow, taking considerable longer that we expected, and though we did go through patches of heavy rain the winds were not that bad. An hour and a half into the journey we pulled into a Pemex station, but the electric was out, so we were unable to get gas. We did word that Stan was only a few hours away from hitting the coast between Catemaco and Alvarado (further south and far sooner that any of us were lead to believe) as a category 1 hurricane! We continued, seeing more evidence of downed trees, extensive flooding besides the road even a wash out or two and traversed a couple of low water spots. We continued on, as did others until we came to another halt at 11AM with an assortment of half a dozen vehicles in front of us. The word was that the road ahead had been completely washed out. We had no choice but to turn around. A half mile back traffic was again stopped and a number of people were milling around a bridge. Apparently they had been inspecting the bridge that we had just crossed less than 10 minutes ago and noticed that a girder was very loose, but the main support beams were in tack. A number of people, including our drivers felt that it was manageable for smaller vehicles. We all got out and ran across the bridge in the rain and the drivers made in across, with our bags. By the time to drove several kilometers a number of vehicles had pulled over at the small village of Hidalgo and the word was that the road had been washed out a kilometer to the east. We were now isolated with no why out. As luck would have we seeked shelter in the Victoria café, a three sided

concrete block structure with sugar cane thatching over a beamed roof. The floor was wet, not from leaks, but from everyone tracking water in on their shoes and someone had an untrained poodle whose owner did not care that it had left a huge deposit besides the counter. Here also with numerous others in the same position as us we found seats, a few tables, useable bathrooms, and though there was no electricity they were still able to produce a little coffee and a bit to eat. This would be home for the foreseeable future. Now what? As we sat inside, wet and cold, watching the wind and rain pick up and drop, the good news was that it seemed as though it was not getting worse. We pondered our options (slim to none) over the early afternoon hours. Word came from a policeman who had taken the same route as us and who somehow had reached the village in spite of numerous wash outs. He told us that Stan had turned southwards hitting Catemaco, was moving fast, and would out of here in a matter of hours. Our first reaction was of astonishment. 14 hours previously the update was for a landfall still over 24 hours away from this moment and well to our north. Having tried to do everything to get away from Stan, it turns out that we were almost smack bang in the middle of it!

We drove up the road to check the major wash out, walking the last $\frac{3}{4}$ of mile due to the unstable bridge. It was horrendous. The small river had risen considerably and bypassed the abutments and washed out a 100 foot section 20 feet deep. There were a number of people there and the word was that someone trying to cross did not make it and was washed downstream. We then drove up and down the road and found one spot where we could just (barely) get cell phone service, as long as one did not move a foot in any direction. A phone call was made to Pronatura headquarters to let them know our predicament and have them get word to the US embassy and consulate in Mexico City that a dozen gringos (along with others) were stranded and to send help. We did get word back that the embassy had been notified about us and that the Mexican army was on its way. Though it sounded great and they could not tell us when that would be, we were left to believe it only if we ever saw them. Our string of bad luck continued..... one of the phones ran out of power and the other one out of minutes! It was late afternoon and the rain had stopped and it looked as though it was clearing. We all went for a short walk to the village store and this time luck was at least on our side.... they had phone cards – right here in the middle of nowhere! We bought them out and stocked up on candles and flashlights. An army helicopter flew over, much to our surprise which got our hopes up. We waved, cheered and shouted for help, but it never landed, opting to check over the damage and move on. If it had not sunk in before, it certainly had now, that we were in for the night, and possibly the long haul. Considering what we had gone through and what lay ahead everyone was in good spirits. After dark a few read, others pondered (we were so close yet so far to getting out – there was only one wash out between us and ‘safety’) and a handful played rummy before picking what each of us perceived to be the best spot for the night. For some it was a chair, others a table, and others the seats in the van. We were not the only ones; there were at least 5 buses, each with good numbers aboard. This was certainly a day we would never forget.

Day 11 / October 5 – Hidalgo to Veracruz; Cosomaloapan Wetlands

By daybreak most of us were up, having had a mixed night of sleep as one would expect. The word was that a number of people that had been on the buses made it out by foot during the night. The waters had receded and a cable had been placed across the wash out and one could make it across the water and up the abutment, though it would be an ordeal, only for the fit and brave. There was also word that one could head south out of the village and take a path towards the river where there was a small bridge one could walk across that would take you to the other side. We were also told that the road heading west was intact. Now, we just had to make it across, one way or another. We drove and walked to the wash out to see for ourselves and sure enough people were crossing. The Mexican army was no where in sight – what a surprise! There was a bus on the other side and I had Bob make sure that we could use it and sure enough the driver was willing to take us to Veracruz City...for an exorbitant fee, but at stage we just had to get there. A pick up truck pulled up beside us and a man got out telling us that his wife was in labour and that she had to get across to get to the hospital – he was desperate. A hammock was located (how convenient – actually I think it was in the back of the truck) and she was placed on it with someone holding her IV in their teeth as he and half a dozen others people carried her down a slope and along the base of the road to the river where they negotiated the water and climb up the abutment and then were aided by a human chain to make it the final steep 50 feet. Bob and Randy checked the other route across the river, which turned out to be very muddy and slippery and we negotiated several mules to help with the crossing. We returned to our base and told everyone the good news - it was moving day! One van took the luggage to the wash out where 5 brave souls made the short crossing that the pregnant woman made an hour before. Locals helped take the bags across by the same means. The rest of the group took the long way around, first picking up custom made walking sticks from those clearing their property of fallen trees, and then having a couple of farmers hold some of our arms and lead us across their flattened field of maize to a rather muddy and very slippery narrow path. After a half mile of slow, careful and at times treacherous walking we reached the small bridge. It was a relief to realize that we were about to actually make it out. The other side was steep for the first hundred yards, but we negotiated it and then it was onto the dirt road, where a taxi took 4 people to the bus and 2 of us followed by foot. By now numerous people were taking the washed out route using a rope guideline to stabilize them as they crossed. Having taken us about an hour and a half to make our route, it meant that the bags were already loaded on the bus. 23 hours after we were forced to abandon any idea of continuing, we were now on our way. It turned out we were about 8 kilometres from Acayucan (civilization) which is only a short distance from the toll road, which was our goal so that we could escape Stan. So close yet so far! Brunch was most welcome in Acayucan and then it was onto Veracruz City.