

Mexico Birds & Butterflies | Feb. 17-24, 2024

Trip Report | by Greg Butcher



With guide Carlos Gonzalez and driver Basilio Garcia and participants Adele and John, Craig, Gabi and Tovi, Jeremiah and Marcia, Linda, Mike and Nanette



Sat., Feb. 17

Arrival at Mexico City Airport

Six of us arrived early to tour parts of Mexico City. All but Adele and John met for dinner in the Courtyard by Marriott restaurant. We had quite a struggle finding the hotel from the airport, but it all worked out!

Sun., Feb. 18

La Cima | Almoloya del Rio (Lerma Marshes)

We started out in Mexico City at 0-dark-30 (actually 5:45) and arrived in La Cima on a cold and frosty morning. We had a great start with several Sierra Madre Sparrows and lots of Striped Sparrows providing good views and a Long-tailed Wood-Partridge serenading us loudly. We enjoyed our first field breakfast by Basilio. We walked a bit down the hike-bike trail and stood under a pair of Red Crossbills as they were building their nest! A few of us got to see the wood-partridges and/or Green-striped Brushfinch, but I think we all got good looks at the gorgeous Golden-browed Warbler. Lunch featured blue-corn quesadillas with a delicious variety of fillings in a small-town restaurant along the road. During the after-lunch drive, we were all focused on the snow-capped Nevado de Tolima volcano that dominated the horizon. At Lerma Marsh (Almoloya del Rio), the Black-pollled Yellowthroat was the first bird we saw, and we found our first of many Vermilion Flycatchers. A big flock of 65



White-faced Ibises flew slowly overhead. We drove on and settled into our Hotel Agua Blanca in Jungapeo and enjoyed a good dinner before an early start the next morning.

Mon., Feb. 19 **Sierra Chincua**

We started with a lot of anticipation this morning, since today was devoted to the monarch butterflies at Sierra Chincua, at a much higher altitude than the hotel. We had time to bird at high elevation before the monarchs, and it seemed like Yellow-eyed Juncos were everywhere. The bird of the day was undoubtedly Red Warbler! It's a stunner! To see the monarchs, most of us chose to ride horses. It was probably more for fun than for rest, but it was definitely a fun part of the trip! The hike was about 3 miles round-trip with perhaps a 1,000-foot elevation gain, peaking at 11,111 feet, according to one of our iPhone altimeter apps. We were all concerned because we had heard about the serious decline in the number of monarchs, but we were still awed at the number we saw. It was a sunny day, so the monarchs were very active and vibrant in our videos. We expected that most of the monarchs would be clinging to the Oyamel Fir trees (*Abies religiosa*), and many were, but because of the sunshine, they were in deciduous shrubs and nearby mud puddles as well. We were glad we came on Monday because we had as much time as we wanted with the monarchs. We heard that the day before (Sunday) people were hurried on after just 5 minutes. I was surprised when I learned that there were 50 trees with monarchs last year at Sierra Chincua and only 15 this year. Luckily, those 15 trees were impressive. Let's hope the monarchs can rebound from this low. Back at the hotel, some of us took an afternoon walk up the hill and got great looks at an Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush and several other species before dinner.

Tues., Feb. 20 **From Hotel Agua Blanca to Posada Yolihuani**

Every morning at Agua Blanca we either saw or heard Streak-backed Orioles. This morning we stayed long enough to get good looks and added several Hooded Orioles. They were just ordinary dry hills near the hotel, but they produced 6 species of hummingbirds, Russet-crowned Motmot, Golden Vireo, a surprise Banded Wren, the elegant Gray Silky-Flycatcher, a pair of Rusty-crowned Ground-Sparrows, six migrant warbler species, and some gorgeous Varied Buntings. A couple hours later, we were driving down the road, each minding our own business, when Carlos noted a flock of low-flying swifts. When we jumped out of the van, there were 30 White-naped Swifts, an endemic Mexican species. Half of Lake Cuitzeo has dried up, but we found a spot along the highway to view some of the other half. We estimated 3,000 Ruddy Ducks, 200 Great Egrets, 200 Yellow-headed Blackbirds, 20 Forster's Terns, 20 Black-necked Stilts, and 20 species overall. Then it was on to the Pueblo Magico, Patzcuaro, and our first great dinner on the town square ("zocalo"). It was our first of two five-butterfly days. A few monarchs were about, and we added Cabbage White, several sulphurs, and two gorgeous species: the green-and-black Malachite and the glowing orange Julia Heliconian.



Wed., Feb. 21 Cerro Burro

It's not often that you get to see Eastern and Western Bluebirds side-by-side, but we did this morning. We also got to see our first Chihuahuan Meadowlarks, recently split from Eastern Meadowlark. After enjoying open fields, we started climbing up Cerro Burro. Three Transvolcanic Jays came to yell at us, and we found two Mexican Violetears and two White-striped Woodcreepers. A bit farther up the mountain produced three Gray-barred Wrens, two Rivoli's Hummingbirds, and a Painted Redstart. We spent the afternoon exploring Patzcuaro and its marketplace. Patzcuaro is declared a pueblo magico because it has maintained colonial-style architecture all around the town square (zocalo). Dinner was exquisite: we had a 5-course Mexican dinner made just for us at Santa Huacal where the vegetarian options were just as interesting as the chicken dish.

Thurs., Feb. 22 Cráter Volcánico La Alberca

We drove to the volcanic crater pond in Tacambaro only to be surprised by a huge party of students and their parents. Most of the birds remained, and we got good looks at a Squirrel Cuckoo, Bright-rumped Attila, Flame-colored Tanager, 6 species of migrant warblers, and a Thick-billed Kingbird. We had lunch at the lovely Quinta Sauz, with two Blue Mockingbirds for desert. On the way back to Patzcuaro, we enjoyed great looks at Mountain Trogons and a bird Carlos had been seeking for years, but never seen: a hybrid between a Collared Towhee and an Olive-backed Spotted Towhee! It was our second five-butterfly day with Giant Swallowtail, Cabbage White, Clouded Sulphur, Zebra Heliconian, and a Fritillary. Back at the hotel, we were surprised by 17 bird species in an hour of relaxing in the courtyard of Posada Yolihuani, including a Berylline Hummingbird perching on a close-by TV antenna and a Canyon Wren singing from a nearby roof.

Fri., Feb. 23 Estribo Grande | Laguna Churintzio

We began our last morning on one of our easiest, most scenic, and relaxing birding walks on the Estribo Grande, high above Lake Patzcuaro. There were many joggers, but few cars, and lots of birds. We enjoyed Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo high in a leafless tree, a pair of flyover Hook-billed Kites, and a couple of Acorn Woodpeckers among all the holes they had drilled to create a granary. We added a pair of Gray-collared Becards, a Plumbeous Vireo, and small groups of Spotted Wrens and Gray Silky-Flycatchers. We had our best views of Spotted Towhee (the Olive-backed morph), White-throated Thrush, and Crescent-chested, Black-throated Gray, and Hermit Warblers. Flame-colored Tanager was seared in our brain! We took our group picture overlooking the lake and valley below. On our way to Guadalajara, we visited an old-field and wetland in Churintzio and saw a couple of



oriole species (Orchard and Hooded), a couple of Varied Buntings, and a couple of Cinnamon-rumped Seedeaters. For the last time, we remarked how red the male House Finches are here compared to the ones back home (but not as red as the male Vermilion Flycatchers). We ended our stay with a good dinner and night's sleep (well, except for those who had to leave at 4 a.m. for their morning flight home). We were at Quinta Don Jose Boutique Hotel in Tlaquepaque, a suburb of Guadalajara, not far from the airport.

Sat., Feb. 24 **Quinta Don Jose Boutique Hotel**

A few of us birded in the hotel courtyard in the morning, adding Gila Woodpecker as a new species and seeing 20 species total. Three different hotel courtyards were great birding sites on this trip! Basilio dropped off me, Carlos, Linda, Gabi, and Tovi at the Guadalajara airport, then began the long drive home to Oaxaca. Adele and John stayed behind to enjoy another 24 hours in Tlaquepaque.

Photos: Monarch Butterflies (Gabi Hauser - GH), Golden-browed Warbler (GH), Broad-billed Hummingbird (GH), Hepatic Tanager (GH), Black-throated Gray Warbler (GH), Mountain Trogon (GH), Western Bluebird (Adele Skolits - AS), Curve-billed Thrasher (AS), Vermilion Flycatcher (AS), Great Kiskadee (GH), Monarch Butterflies (GH), Russet-crowned Motmot (GH), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (AS), Loggerhead Shrike (AS), Red Warbler (GH), Scenic (Marcia Parker), McGillivray's Warbler (GH), Transvulcanic Jay (GH), Gray-barred Wren (GH), Masked Tityra (GH)