

Oaxaca Valley: Birds, Culture & Crafts

Oct. 20 – 31, 2024 | Trip Report | by James P. Smith

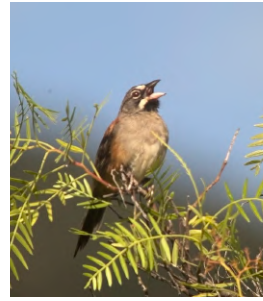


With local guide Eric Antonio Martinez, our driver Ramon, and nine wonderful guests; Ana, Anne, Emily & Brett, Laura & George, Kathy & John, and Mark.



Sun., Oct. 20 Arrivals

Most of the group had arrived in Oaxaca a day or two ahead of the tour before meeting for the first time at the Mision de los Angeles Hotel close to the heart of Oaxaca City. The hotel was delightfully situated within comfortable walking distance of Oaxaca's famed architectural and cultural delights. Despite the hustle and bustle of surrounding the city, the tastefully landscaped grounds of the hotel provided a fine introduction to some of the local avifauna with Inca Dove, Beryline Hummingbird, Vermilion Flycatcher and Wilson's Warbler all being found by group members on the first afternoon. Tropical Storm Nadine had done her best to dampen arrivals but didn't interfere too much, especially for Emily and Brett who'd been out to a local park in the pouring rain and found Oaxaca State's second record of Bay-breasted Warbler, quite an auspicious start! We



met with Eric Martinez at dinner, our expert local guide along with his trusty driver Ramon both of whom would be with us throughout the whole tour. Without so much as a pause Eric expertly talked us through the restaurant's menu, seamlessly translating from Spanish to English and graciously describing ALL the local Oaxacan specialty dishes in detail. Mark led the way with formal introductions as we got to know each other around the dinner table and learned of the hopes and expectations for the trip ahead.

Mon., Oct. 21 Teotitlan Del Valle | Rancho Zapata

After an early breakfast we headed east to Teotitlan Del Valle, Eric's birthplace and home town, and the center of the Zapotec weaving industry. Quiet picturesque streets and cobbled climbs greeted our arrival as Eric described the history between the town and its weaving and indicated the general area had been settled by established communities as early as 7000 BC!

Above Teotitlan, Piedra Azul Reservoir came into view and we spent an enjoyable hour scanning the area for water birds. Least Grebes along with American Coots and Common Gallinules were among the most common and shorebirds were represented by Spotted Sandpiper and Killdeer. A few minutes later several White-throated Towhees appeared in the scrub, our first endemic and thankfully common enough to provide a steady sequence of sightings in the first few days of the trip. The whole of the Oaxaca Valley was green and lush after an especially good rainy season and the hillsides were full of mesquite and oak scrub with an abundance of flowering plants. Comparisons with certain parts of Southeastern Arizona came to mind as some of the habitat looked very similar indeed. Despite the similarities, it didn't take too long to find some truly endemic birds including a singing Bridled Sparrow and an aloof but eventually visible Blue Mockingbird. Migrants included Tennessee, Nashville, MacGillivray's and Wilson's Warblers while beautiful Gray Silky Flycatchers captured the imagination as they congregated in the willows, their cheerful call notes ringing out across the valley.

We drove further upslope following winding roads and climbing in elevation as the trees looked more stunted within the scrub-like habitat though we still had magnificent views of the valley below. Butterflies were prolific along this road and Emily and Brett were in their element photographing the abundance of species as well as numerous dragonflies and other critters. Emily did fantastically well to find an endemic Showy Leopard Frog that was doing its best to hide in a muddy stream and, thanks to her skillful capture, we all had great views!

A few of the 'hoped-for' birds here didn't show but we did have good views of Nutting's Flycatcher and Dusky



Hummingbird as well as a Gray-breasted Woodpecker perched directly alongside a Gray Silky Flycatcher. High flying raptors included a dark-morph Short-tailed Hawk, along with Coopers and Sharp-shinned Hawks. An Indigo Bunting, quite a dull individual, came into view as Eric successfully coaxed in a pair of Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays of the *sumicrasti* race, a potential future split.

As the heat of the day began to make a difference, we headed downslope and back into the Oaxaca Valley where it was even hotter but, thankfully, we had a cool spot in mind for lunch at the charming Rancho Zapata in San Pablo Villa de Mitla. Eric not only guided us through the menu but also escorted us around the grounds showing us the mechanics of the centuries-old method of Mezcal production for which the Oaxaca Valley is famed. Gray-breasted Woodpeckers were easily found nesting in the cacti here and a couple of Boucard's Wrens, yet another endemic, were easily seen. After a delicious lunch we sampled Mezcal of varying ages, and several souvenir bottles were purchased!

In early afternoon we returned to Teotitlan and enjoyed a wonderful demonstration of traditional rug weaving by Eric's friend Rosaria where the family business (El Tono de la Cochinilla) is committed to using authentic, organic dyes to add pigment to their woven products and several beautiful examples were purchased. And, we couldn't leave without a few more bird sightings with a Beryline hummingbird perched on roadside wires outside the store and wonderful views of an adult White-tailed Hawk on the hunt above the town.

The day was already pretty full but Eric had allowed enough time to drop down to a local river lined with mature oaks and native scrub. Ana did well to see and follow a Lesser Nighthawk flying through the scrub here which thankfully landed on a horizontal oak beam and allowed for wonderful scope views - quite the treat! Black Phoebe, Vermilion and Ash-throated Flycatchers all showed well here and a Greater Pewee, a flycatcher typically found at higher elevations, understandably garnered lots of attention. On the drive out we paused to enjoy a field full of sparrows which included good views of multiple Lark Sparrows, while Clay-colored and Chipping Sparrows required a keen eye and a scope to pick out. The visit had not been without rarities either as we found a migrant Magnolia Warbler and a resident (female) Cinnamon-rumped Seedeater, yet another addition to our already growing list of endemics. We celebrated an awesome first full day with a quick run through the bird list and a delightful meal back at the Mision de Los Angeles.

Tues., Oct. 22 La Cumbre | Mision de los Angeles

An early start and a relatively short drive found us heading north along Route 175 climbing through the forest until we reached 'La Cumbre', literally meaning 'the summit' or 'top of the mountain'. Once there we left the



tarmac behind and entered the mature pine-oak woodland on a dirt road that ultimately branched out into multiple trails as well as providing access to a series of dedicated mountain bike trails. Being birders and early risers, we beat the bikers to the trails and it wasn't too long before Anne's sharp eyes spotted a *gallinaceous* bird by the road as we were driving along. Eric asked Ramon to pause and commented "I saw something interesting too". With that we stepped out of the vehicle and into the atmospheric mist of the drizzle-soaked forest pine forest. The gamebird turned out to be a Long-tailed Wood-Partridge, in fact a couple of them. Frustratingly, they were quite easily spotted by Ana, Anne and Eric but remained exceptionally difficult for the rest of the group to see! The birds scurried down a steep embankment and vocalized for a while but, like all wily gamebirds, refused to come any closer for views. On the other hand, the first stop of the day was full of good birds including a big attraction for some in our party – the stunning Red Warbler!! White-eared Hummingbirds were plentiful here and we had good views of several migrant Townsend's Warblers as well as the highly attractive and resident Golden-browed Warbler.

We drove higher to an elevation of almost 10,000 feet. Mist and drizzle continued to drift atmospherically through the Mexican White Pines and the presence of hanging moss, bromeliads and epiphytes inevitably drew comparisons to cloud forest but Eric reminded us we were, in fact, in humid pine forest. It was certainly a beautiful environment and supported a range of key species including several more sightings of the much-prized Red Warbler and a whole flock of endemic Dwarf Jays accompanied by an equally impressive flock of Gray-banded Wrens. Handsome Steller's Jays moved around with them too. At the highest point in the forest we came across more feeding flocks as well as endemic Collared Towhees, more Golden-browed Warblers, a couple of Cinnamon-bellied Flower-Piercers and two high-elevation hummingbirds; Amethyst-throated and Blue-throated Mountain-Gems. Eric was keen to share his knowledge of butterflies too and put the scope on a regionally endemic Pine Satyr for all to see.

A fine morning at La Cumbre was drawing to a close as we dropped down the north slope of the mountain to the Colibre Café for lunch where the house-made hot chocolate proved to be a hit! Some light birding from the delightfully constructed balcony not only offered close-up views of Blue-throated Mountain-gems but also Nashville and Hermit Warblers, and several (endemic) Rufous-capped Brushfinch. Somehow the day had flown by and we arrived back at the Mision de los Angeles to chill out and enjoy a little downtime before dinner. In the meantime Emily and Brett birded around the hotel grounds and noted four



Swainson's Hawks migrating overhead, several Beryline Hummingbirds, at least four Rufous-backed Robins and a Cinnamon-rumped Seedeater!

Wed., Oct. 23 Presa Las Minas | Santa María del Tule | Zócalo Oaxaca

After another early breakfast we headed east to Presa La Minas, an area of mid-elevation oak-scrub with a smattering Mexican White Pine overlooking a fairly sizeable reservoir. The day started cool, crisp and refreshing, a welcome change from the previous days drizzle. The birding was off to an electrifying start with new species appearing immediately including our first Thick-billed Kingbird as well a smart Black-throated Gray Warbler and a couple of Blue Mockingbirds scuttling across the track. Handsome Black-vented Orioles vied for attention as Eric focused on endemics and, after a good deal of effort and remarkable patience, eventually found two Ocellated Thrashers with scope views enjoyed by all. In the process we had excellent views of another local endemic, the Oaxaca Sparrow while Slaty Vireo proved much more challenging and was only seen by one or two people in the group. Eric picked out the song of a late Dwarf Vireo, and we played hide n' seek with a beautiful Golden Vireo. Much to Laura's delight, Western Wood-Pewee and Greater Pewee perched up together and were rather more cooperative, while Emily and Brett not only enjoyed the proliferation of butterflies but also came up with another locally rare migrant warbler, an immature Chestnut-sided! Once the heat of the day really kicked in Eric invited us to one of his favorite lunch spots in Santa María del Tule after which we visited the giant Montezuma Cypress in the church grounds in the town center. El Árbol del Tule (The Tree of Tule) is believed to have the stoutest trunk in the world outmatching even the largest Giant Sequoias of North America with a circumference of around 42 meters! Birds were few in the town center although we did note a couple of Crested Caracaras spooking the local Feral Rock Doves. Later Eric escorted us on a delightful evening walk through the pedestrian plazas and Zocalo of historic Oaxaca City and we finished the day with a wonderful rooftop meal at La Qunices Letras....pure magic!

Thurs., Oct. 24 Arqueológica Monte Albán | Azucena Zapoteca | La Puesta del Sol

We again opted for an early breakfast with a view to being on our way by 6:30am. There was a fair amount of excitement as we loaded up the vehicle, Emily and Brett had found a couple more Rufous-backed Robins in the hotel grounds. Though not a rare bird it's sometimes tricky to see and was well received by several members of the group.



Monte Alban and the Zapotec hilltop ruins was next on the agenda and the morning commute across town proved to be quite busy, even as early as 7am. Upon arrival we found the roadway closed to traffic for construction, not a huge surprise as Mark had mentioned the closures from a private trip a couple of days prior. The road was quite peaceful aside from locals taking full advantage of the quiet conditions for an early morning workout, either jogging or cycling up the 1.5 mile climb up to the visitor center! A steady walk would take us uphill to the ruins and, after seeing Black-vented Orioles straight away, we pressed on into a gloriously crisp morning while simultaneously enjoying breathtaking views across the Oaxaca Valley. It was a little chilly to start but as things warmed up, so did the birding with Gray Silky-Flycatcher, Western Tanagers, Wilson's and MacGillvray's Warblers and good views of a Golden Vireo. A Slaty Vireo was much more difficult to see but after a great deal of work by Eric, highly satisfactory views came to the fore and, with its gray plumage, iridescent green wings and tail, and pale, staring eye, it was one of the more satisfying birds of the morning. It was also a little odd to see some species nest building despite it being late October with Lesser Goldfinch, Beryline and Dusky Hummingbirds all seen carrying material and a neat reminder that the breeding cycle in the tropics goes on pretty much throughout the year.

On reaching the visitor center Eric turned his hand from birding guide to archaeological/historical guide and gave a thoroughly enjoyable tour of the Zapotec ruins high above the Oaxaca Valley. For some in our party it was one of the most spectacular archaeological sites they'd visited anywhere! Monte Alban was not without birds either and we had beautiful views of a dark-morph Short-tailed Hawk, several huge White-collared Swifts and an apparent fallout of Western Kingbirds with one or two Cassin's Kingbirds mixed with them. After the tour we walked back down the entrance road when Emily and Brett spotted a rare Plain-capped Starthroat, and lower down the slopes, both Virginia's and Orange-crowned Warblers were found among several Townsend's.

Eric came up with another delightful spot for lunch at Azucena Zapoteca after which we headed south on Highway 175 for the long, scenic drive to San Jose Del Pacifico and our new accommodations at La Puesta Del Sol. A brief gas station stop just north of Miahuatlán produced the first Loggerhead Shrike and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher of the trip after which it was pretty much a straight drive, eventually climbing the narrow mountain roads to reach our lodging for the next two nights. The landscape was remote and mountainous and, just to add a little spice to the sense of adventure, a power outage greeted our arrival! A few Garnet-throated Hummingbirds were noted around the lodge in the fading light and Long-tailed Wood-Partridges could be heard calling from the pine forest at dusk.



Eric's favorite (family owned) Italian Restaurant was the venue for dinner where 'healthy' portions were served and well received. At an elevation of 8200 ft the rarified air was somewhat chilly at night and, as we returned to our rustic cabins, a young staff member came by and stoked up the wood in the fireplace for those requesting it.

Fri., Oct. 25 **Magdalena Loxicha-Oaxaca | Puesta del Sol | San Mateo Rio Hondo**

There was some magic in the pre-dawn air as the songs of Mexican Whip-poor-wills filtered through the pine-wooded hillside on which the cabins had been so tastefully constructed. At 6 am we met in the main lodge building for breakfast where Garnet-throated Hummingbirds were already gracing the feeders. Soon afterwards we had a short walk around the lodge and restaurant finding a Red Crossbill, a singing Brownback Solitaire, a calling Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush and the first of several endemic Bumblebee Hummingbirds, the second smallest hummingbird in the world after the Bee Hummingbird of Cuba.

Eric was especially keen to find us a White-throated Jay and we spent a considerable amount of time searching without success. On the other hand, the search did find Townsend's, Orange-crowned and Olive Warblers, Bullock's Oriole and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. The wooded valleys south of San Jose Del Pacifico held more in store as the sunlight brought a hint of warmth to an otherwise chilly morning. Although initially seeming rather quiet, we eventually came across an exciting feeding flock that was almost overwhelming at times; Mexican Chickadee, Hermit, Crescent-chested and Red Warblers all appeared, as did a Cassin's Vireo plus Tufted, Hammond's and Pine Flycatchers. There was even a Slaty Vireo, the same species that had been so difficult to see just a few days earlier! Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercers and a couple of handsome Black-headed Siskins dropped in to join the melee.

Returning to La Puesta Del Sol Eric tried again for the White-throated Jay but it wasn't to be though we did find our first Mexican Violetear, plus more Crimson-bellied Flowerpiercers and enjoyed great views of Bumblebee, White-eared, Rivoli's and Garnet-throated Hummingbirds, all before brunch.

In the afternoon we visited San Mateo Rio Hondo, an area of mature mixed woodland dominated by pine. After a quiet start we ultimately enjoyed a fine selection including the endemic Russet Nightingale-Thrush, more Olive Warblers, with White-collared Swifts feeding overhead and good views of our first Western Flycatcher the trip. Later we dined at the Restaurante Puesta del Sol and retired to cozy those cabanas, grateful of the warm fireplace.



Sat., Oct. 26

San Mateo Rio Hondo | La Copolita Finca | Don Gabriel | Parque Hundido Chahue

The day dawned cool and blustery with wind gusts originating from the Pacific blasting through the pines and whistling around the cabins. Eric was still doggedly determined to show us a White-throated Jay and, after breakfast and loading up the vehicle, we went back to San Mateo Rio Hondo, the same spot where we'd been the previous evening. Upon arrival the birding felt promising right from the start with Townsend's Warbler, Brown Creeper and Hutton's Vireo amongst the first species to show. After only a few minutes, Eric heard the subtle calls of a White-throated Jay and quickly went to work to trying to coax it down towards the road. Pretty soon we were all having excellent views as it foraged at eye-level in the pines only a few meters away. It was a lone bird with only a Mexican Violetear keeping it company! Delighted with another endemic and a great start to the day, we continued the journey south along Route 175 with more treats in store.

Eric continued to focus on endemics and soon found a pair of Blue-capped Hummingbirds, a species with a world range restricted entirely to the Sierra Madre del Sur, and we had excellent views of both sexes. There was another Macgillivray's Warbler here too and the first Black-throated Green Warbler of the trip was spotted by Anne. Moreover, the butterfly show was just out of this world with Ruddy Daggerwing, Malachite, Mexican Heliconian, Orange Mapwing, Anna's Eighty-Eight, and several giant White Morphis to mention a mere handful of the species seen. In fact, White Morphos dazzled us throughout the journey as we continued south along down Route 175 towards the coast.

The next stop was at La Copolita and it really couldn't have been better as we walked straight into a major feeding flock. It was busy, very busy in fact with, among other things, a fine selection of vireos with Golden, Yellow-throated and Blue-headed all on view. Eric's sharp ears picked out the song of a Fan-tailed Warbler, one of the more desired warblers which put on a brief show before quickly disappearing into the muggy, leafy shadows. Warblers popped into view with mesmerizing frequency offering nice comparisons between closely related taxa such as Townsend's and Black-throated Green Warblers, and there was an Ovenbird as more warblers came into view including a skulking Golden-crowned. And then, quite suddenly, we were stumped by the appearance of an odd warbler that showed at eye level. It was sporting a bold white eye-ring, notably dull brownish upperparts and had 'egg-yolk' undertail coverts, features that could only point to one bird - Colima Warbler, a very rare bird in Oaxaca and furnishing only the fifth record for the state!

As we departed Yellow-winged Caciques flew across the road and Anne picked out the first of several White-throated Magpie-Jays for the day. Eric chose a spectacular spot for lunch, the Finca Don Gabriel with its fine



vista where Ana managed to pick out a soaring Short-tailed Hawk. On the drive out, several White-throated Magpie-Jays teed up close to the access road, and very close to the bus!

By late afternoon we'd already reached the modern coastal town of Huatulco. Eric checked-in the group with typical efficiency and we enjoyed a little downtime in our new accommodations before an early supper at 6 pm. Just few minutes birding around hotel grounds saw Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, and flocks of White-fronted Amazons flying over while Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised on the ocean breezes high overhead. The Hotel Villa Blanca was to be home for the next five nights and conveniently situated close to the center of Huatulco with all the amenities of a modern resort. Eric had some history here too having lived in the town for five years during his time as cruise ship guide. Later we settled down for a supper of traditional (and non-traditional) Oaxacan dishes at the onsite restaurant and caught up on the daily bird list after yet another tremendous day in the field.

Sun., Oct. 27 **Camino Santa Maria Huatulco | Camino Pluma Hidalgo Café Pluma “Oro del Sur” | Parque Hundido Chahue**

Early morning saw us heading back inland for a series of stops along the road to Pluma Hidalgo. We began on the outskirts of Santa Maria where each stop held something special. White-throated Magpie-Jays and Masked Tityras, and a handsome Russet-crowned Motmot, the only one of the tour, showed up on the lower slopes. Farther upslope we enjoyed Fan-tailed Warblers, Northern Emerald Toucanets, a spectacular Squirrel Cuckoo and a challenging yet rewarding Ruddy Foliage-gleaner. A singing Tropical Parula generated some excitement, and Banded and Happy Wrens were coaxed into view as well as a couple of Gray-breasted Wood-Wrens. Two endemic woodpeckers, Golden-cheeked on the lower slopes, and a pair of Gray-crowned Woodpeckers higher up, were both rich rewards while overhead raptors appeared with some regularity including migrating Broad-winged Hawks and a couple of Bat Falcons, at times surrounded by foraging Chestnut-collared Swifts.

Pluma Hidalgo lies in the heart of coffee growing country and Eric invited us to his favorite family-owned business. To get there he organized a fleet of 'Tuk-Tuks' (so much fun!) and sped up the road to the finca as the gradient was far too steep and narrow for Ramon to drive in his bus. Not only did we come away with bags of freshly roasted coffee beans but also enjoyed a delicious chicken lunch served by our hosts. Quite naturally, freshly brewed coffee of varying strengths was offered too after which we enjoyed a brief but fascinating tour of the farm and its coffee roasting process. A productive walk along the roads around the farm saw a Mexican Hermit show briefly, wagging its tail before 'bolting' down the valley giving sharp, high-pitched calls and we had brief views of the cinnamon-sided form of Green-fronted Hummingbird, a potential future split. After numerous Turkey Vultures drifted out of the thickening mist Eric suddenly spotted a Zone-tailed Hawk 'teetering' with its



Turkey Vulture-like profile but there was no mistake as it showed off its black and white banded tail. On the descent from Pluma Hidalgo we were fortunate to come across the only Rusty Sparrows of the entire tour.

The afternoon was somewhat open-ended but with the Parque Hundido Chahue just across the street (quite literally), Eric suggested an optional late afternoon birding walk which turned out to offer some of the most exciting birding of the tour. We had wonderful views of endemic West Mexican Chachalacas and Golden-cheeked Woodpeckers, and the local Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls and Rufous-backed Robins put on a fabulous show. Yellow-winged Caciques were common and easy to see, flaring their extraordinary crown feathers and, with five species of oriole on view, Eric talked us through the finer identification points between the black-backed form of Streaked-backed Oriole versus Altamira Oriole. In the meantime, Emily spotted a Yellow-throated Warbler and we all had fine views of Cinnamon-bellied Saltators.

Excited pre-roost gatherings of White-fronted Amazons screeched around the park and, as we walked towards the marina, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers began to appear in the scrub and bushes. At first we only noted one or two but it soon became apparent that the hedgerows by the marina were full of them! Had we just witnessed a ‘fall-out’ of migrant Scissor-tailed Flycatchers? It certainly looked that way and was totally in keeping with the time of year, the birds evidently resting up before embarking on a night of migration. A spectacular walk closed with Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and Black-necked Stilts by the marina and hundreds of Gray-breasted Martins and Mangrove Swallows swirling around before going to roost.

Mon., Oct. 28 **Parque National Huatulco | Cruz del Monte Parque Nacional**

Lowland birding was on the agenda, a habitat and area that we hadn’t previously seen - the Park National Huatulco. After a relatively short drive we arrived in time to enjoy the morning flights of dozens of White-winged Doves, White-fronted Amazons, and a few Lilac-crowned Amazons, all of them leaving their respective roosts. A Roadside Hawk was heard calling first thing and an aloof Citreoline Trogon eventually showed well although much better views were to come later in the day. The dense thickets provided fine habitat for some of the more skulking species and we spent time watching White-lored Gnatcatchers while comparing them to nearby Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. We also had great views of a pair of Russet-naped Wrens, endemic to Western Mexico, as well a couple of Scrub Euphonias, and another fine selection of orioles including Streak-backed, Spot-breasted and Altamira. Yet another locally rare warbler, a (Western) Palm, was found too and duly documented.



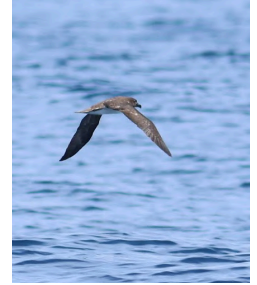
As satisfying as these sightings were, Eric remained focused on endemics and it wasn't too long before he had us all watching a dazzling male Orange-breasted Bunting, a real stunner with turquoise blue upperparts and bright yellow underparts and a sullied orange wash across the breast - Wow!

Meanwhile, a Colima Pygmy-Owl had been calling from the adjacent hillside and the pursuit of it not only led to us hearing a second individual, but also to seeing an endemic Turquoise-crowned Hummingbird! Finding the pygmy-owl was more complicated than hoped and we never did have views but again incredible fortune came our way when Eric spotted a Lesser Ground-Cuckoo moving furtively through the understory. The views were brief but good, the bird's bizarre turquoise and yellow facial skin inspiring thoughts of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. It was a surreal looking bird to say the least and true to form, the ground-cuckoo didn't stick around for long.

After a brief return to town for cold beverages we moved onto a different spot in the park with mature woodland and some welcome shade. The heat of the day was starting to tell and bird activity tapered accordingly but still held lots of interest not least of which was a perched Hook-billed Kite! As we walked a little further along a shaded lane, a large gray-brown bird with a sleek appearance and long pointed wings slipped over the road and flew between the mesquite bushes, and out of sight. Only three of the group saw it and we were a little puzzled for a while, but on reflection it could only have been a Northern Potoo accidentally disturbed from its daytime roost.

A few moments later the Hook-billed Kite took off and 'hooked-up' with several other soaring raptors in the sky above us. It soon became clear an active raptor migration taking place right overhead. The majority were Broad-winged Hawks from the temperate boreal forests of North America, but the kettling flocks were joined by dozens of Black and Turkey Vultures, two Wood Storks, a couple of Magnificent Frigatebirds, plus Grey, Red-tailed and Short-tailed Hawks all joining the action. Three or four Swainson's Hawks were seen too, apparently quite scarce on this particular migration route. The heat of the day inevitably forced a retreat back to Ramon's air conditioned bus and we enjoyed a wonderfully scenic drive through the National Park and along the coast back to the Villa Blanca. The Pacific looked azure and inviting in keen anticipation of pelagic the following day.

After a lunch at a neighboring hotel we set off for the afternoon adventure to a much more heavily wooded section of the national park, a spot called Cruise Del Monte Parque Nacional, a habitat which Eric described as dry tropical forest. Unhappily though, the town had chosen this particular afternoon to grade the access road and an especially belligerent JCB driver refused to let us pass until he'd squared away the section of road he'd been working on! No matter, Ramon's driving skills came to the fore and after about 10 minutes we were



allowed a bumpy passage through and onto the gated entrance of the park.

On arrival the forest was incredibly quiet although Brown-crested and Least Flycatchers could be heard calling and Orange-fronted Parakeets flew overhead. Meanwhile, Eric was determined to find a Colima Pygmy-Owl and it wasn't too long before one started calling and then another with owls calling either side of the track. A Citreoline Trogon flew in and offered really great views and something of a distraction until Eric suddenly spotted a Colima Pygmy-Owl flying straight towards us! And there it perched, a wonderfully perky and cooperative endemic pygmy-owl putting on the most fantastic show and a real testament to Eric's hard work and determination. He never gave up!

As dusk approached, Collared Forest-Falcons began calling, their nasal 'ow' calls repeatedly ringing throughout the forest until we left. And, as we walked back to the vehicles, Lesser Nighthawks cruised overhead and owl-butterflies flitted along the road providing truly a fitting end to another wonderful day.

Tues., Oct. 29 Pelagic adventure in the Pacific!

The day dawned calm and clear with favorable conditions for offshore birding and, while boarding in Santa Cruz Harbor, we were greeted with beaming smiles by our crew. The boat was small yet comfortable, clean and modern and, importantly, generously shaded. Eric knew everyone on board including Hector the Captain and Perfecto, chief deck hand and bird spotter. We were going to be in very good hands!

Brown Pelicans and Royal Terns appeared over the inshore waters while Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised overhead. A Peregrine was seen both perched and in flight as we pushed out onto the open ocean. The species composition changed just a few hundred meters offshore as we encountered flocks of Red-necked Phalaropes on the water and hundreds of migrating Black Terns passing across the horizon. The Continental shelf is relatively close to shore off Huatulco and it wasn't too long before we reached the shelf edge and the first truly pelagic species started to appear with Black-vented Shearwaters and a storm-petrel that Eric thought may have been the Chapman's form of Leach's Storm-Petrel.

Pantropical Spotted and Central American Spinner Dolphins played around the boat for a while and we were fortunate to encounter several Olive Ridley Sea Turtles. Offshore, some of the larger terns proved to be Elegant Terns rather than Royals but the tone of the birding suddenly changed when Hector, the Captain, suddenly called out "Tahiti!!". A chase quickly ensued but our boat was no match for the magnificent *Pseudobulweria* as it



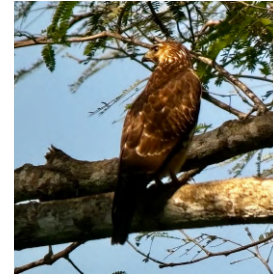
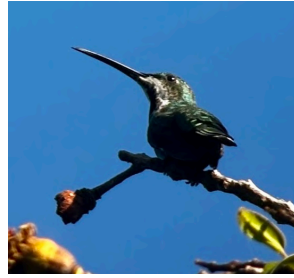
glided effortlessly away somehow keeping its bulk below the horizon, its uniform brown upperparts making it very difficult to see. And then it was gone!

An air of slight despondency descended upon the boat as, at that point in the day, it seemed like our only sighting of Tahiti Petrel had been and gone. We needn't have worried though. Just after a Black Storm-Petrel flew passed the boat, a large brown petrel with gleaming white underparts appeared in the distance and this one, luckily, cruised straight towards the boat and the excited birders aboard! It was another Tahiti Petrel, a real brute of the genus *Pseudobulweria*, and this time we all had wonderful views. Eric was beside himself with excitement and managed to obtain some excellent photos. That sighting set the theme for the rest of the day and as we cruised along the Continental shelf we went on to have another dozen or so sightings of Tahiti Petrels. In fact it proved to be one of the most frequently encountered pelagic species of the whole day. As if we needed further endorsement of the success of the trip, Eric said it was the best day he'd ever had on a pelagic for seeing Tahiti Petrels, a species that breeds on the islands of French Polynesia and yet, bizarrely, is becoming increasingly regular in the warm waters off Western Mexico.

Other pelagic species were a little scarce during the day although we did have reasonable views of Galapagos Shearwaters and more Black-vented Shearwaters. Storm-petrels were few although we did have solid, identifiable views of Black, Least and (Chapman's) Leach's Storm-Petrels and, as if to place the cherry on the cake, we also remarkable views of a breaching Thresher Shark!

On the way back to the harbor, Eric spotted a Leatherback Sea Turtle. Still feeling euphoric after the Tahiti Petrel spectacular, we settled down for a lovely lunch on the beach where Anne's enviable eyesight spotted an immature Yellow-crowned Night-Heron perched on a distant rocky outcrop by the sea and, after completing her own personal trifecta, Ana celebrated with a dip in the beautiful azure waters just off the beach.

An afternoon rest was most welcome after the rigors of the pelagic, though West Mexican Chachalacas resting by the pool were difficult ignore. At dinner in the Villa Blanca we celebrated an exceptional pelagic and closed the day with some incredibly humid night birding. Heard-only Mottled and Pacific Screech-owls and a brilliantly found Buff-collared Nightjar roosting on a cliff face were among the highlights, and we had great fun spotting scorpions using John's black light that he'd generously brought along.



Wed., Oct. 30 Parque Botánico Hagia Sofia | Copalito River Mouth

This morning, we retraced our steps back to the mid-elevation foothills above Santa Maria Huatluco. While the outbound route looked familiar, Eric took us to a new site at Hagia Sofia. We walked the dirt road with ease through the forest overlooking a spectacular Rio Magdalena. Over the next four hours a veritable avian feast came our way, and it was difficult to know where to look at times. Overhead, low passing swifts included Chestnut-collared and White-collared feeding together, among them a couple of Vaux's and a single Black Swift. Hummingbirds included a Long-billed Starthroat seen early in the walk, a Mexican Hermit that was far more cooperative than the single we'd seen a couple of days earlier, and a Green-breasted Mango teed up and showing off for excellent scope views. We tallied six species of vireo not least of which was a late Yellow-green Vireo spotted by Emily and a new bird for the trip. Indeed, quite a number of species we found here could be described as 'rare', at least according to ebird, and included a Blue-winged Warbler and a Great Crested Flycatcher, both familiar species to those living in Eastern US but 'hotline' birds here in Western Mexico.

As the road gained in elevation and then plateaued we enjoyed views of perched Orange-chinned Parakeets, Gray and Broad-winged Hawks, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and our first Melodious Blackbirds of the tour.

The dense understory held some of the more difficult, furtive species, a few of them not seen by the whole group including Red-crowned Ant-tanager, Happy and Banded Wrens, and the aloof, tricky, Red-breasted Chat. An incredibly successful and comfortably cool penultimate morning had drawn to a close and we headed back to the Villa Blanca for lunch and a little down time before one final afternoon adventure.

The mouth of the Rio Copalito provided the venue for the final birding session of the tour and began with a pleasant walk along a picturesque sandy beach towards an estuary. The afternoon light was behind us and ideal for viewing the flocks of terns and shorebirds....Eric had timed the visit to perfection! Large numbers of terns foraged along the riptides just offshore and many of them could be identified as Royal and Elegant with several Common and Blacks and at least one Sandwich Tern among them. On approaching the estuary shorebirds came to the fore with Spotted and Least Sandpipers and Brett spotted a distant Sanderling. Several in our group simultaneously found the sought-after Collared Plovers resting in the rock-strewn tide wrack only a few meters from where we were stood. At least six of them were present and scattered about the beach and we found other species too including Semipalmated and a single Wilson's Plover, while Kathy and John simply sat on the beach and soaked it all in.



Hérons were represented by many groups including our first Reddish Egrets and just a little upriver, a sizable group of Roseate Spoonbills and White Ibis. A tiny, diminutive, Least Turn resting on the beach looked a little sickly and seemed oblivious to a family playing on the beach nearby but it did eventually fly off and seemed healthy. Suddenly Eric became extremely animated as he spotted an immature booby just offshore. It was foraging with the flocks of terns and pelicans following schools of baitfish and, after a few minutes, he seemed confident it was a Nazca Booby. Even down to the last few hours of the tour we were still adding new species!

Eric chose the lovely surroundings of the plaza in Santa Cruz and his favorite Asian restaurant for our farewell dinner, a truly fitting finale and a fine location to wrap up the final bird list of the tour.

Thurs., Oct. 31 Huatulco | Departures

A schedule change by AeroMexico ensured that most of us flying out from Huatulco had flights bumped forward ensuring another early breakfast, and once again we were on the road by 6:15 AM. Our group was evenly divided between those flying out from Huatulco and those taking the road transfer back to Oaxaca City with Eric and Ramon. In the event, the timing was good for both parties and we got to say our goodbyes at Huatulco Airport.

This wonderful tour would not have been possible without the exceptional leadership of Eric and his ever-reliable driver Ramon. Moreover, the group camaraderie on this trip was exceptional and kept things light hearted and fun throughout.

A special word of thanks must go to Emily and Brett who put together a remarkable list of non-avian species at the end of the tour and their non-avian supplement to the trip can viewed [here](#);

Photos: Group (James P. Smith - JPS), Least Sandpiper (George Bakken - GB), Citreoline Trogon (GB), Monte Alban (GB), Scenic (JPS), Bridled Sparrow (JPS), Boucard's Wren (GB), Gray-breasted Woodpecker (GB), Ash-throated Flycatcher (GB), Group Birding (GB), Collared Towhee (GB), Brown-backed Solitaire (GB), Blue-throated Mountain-gem (GB), Dinner in Oaxaca City (JPS), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (GB), Butterfly (GB), Oaxaca Sparrow (GB), Burros (GB), Oaxaca (JPS), Monte Alban (GB), Spiny Lizard (GB), Monte Alban (JPS), Bumblebee Hummingbird (GB), Cabins at La Puesta del Sol (JPS), Blue-capped Hummingbird (GB), Orange-breasted Bunting (JPS), Hook-billed Kite (GB), Simple Patch (GB), Citreoline Trogon (GB), Colima Pygmy-Owl (GB), Sunrise on the pelagic (JPS), Thumbs up all round - Tahiti Petrel!! (Ana Pazos), Leach's Storm-Petrel (Chapman's) (JPS), Thresher Shark (GB), Tahiti Petrel (JPS), Streak-backed Oriole (GB), Dusky-capped Flycatcher (GB), Scenic (JPS), Green-breasted Mango (JPS), Broad-winged Hawk (juvenile) (JPS), Birding at Rio Copolita (JPS), Teracube (GB), Least Sandpiper (GB), Great Crested Flycatcher (JPS)