

Mexico

San Blas

22 February–7 March 2006

Participants:

Beth and Paul Loehnen

Bob Martinka

Dorothy and Mike Rodegerdts

Elaine and George Shelby

Mike Schwitters



Black-throated Magpie-jay

Leader: Jeff Marks

By all accounts, the first Montana Audubon/Birdfinders tour to Western Mexico was a great success. We tallied 285 species, including 40 regional endemics. All but one species, a “screeching” Barn Owl that flew by the leader’s hotel window one night, were seen by most of the participants. Indeed, the aforementioned owl was the sole “heard only” species for the trip. The weather was bright and sunny, and wonderful food and accommodations were enjoyed by all.

Day 1 Participants arrived in Puerto Vallarta and then settled into the 15-passenger van that would serve us well over the next two weeks. The drive to San Pancho, Nayarit, a lovely coastal village some 40km north of Puerto Vallarta, was uneventful, with the usual kettles of Black and Turkey Vultures overhead almost constantly. We unpacked in time for a short pre-dinner walk, encountering Social Flycatcher, Tropical Kingbird, several groups of Sinaloa Crows, and a mixed-species flock that included Orange-crowned, Yellow, and Black-throated Gray Warblers and a Summer Tanager. Black-bellied Whistling-ducks and Black-crowned Night-herons passed overhead while we enjoyed superb food and cold cerveza at an open-air restaurant.

Day 2 After coffee and juice we set out on foot for the morning. Straight off we encountered a Masked Tityra, followed by a skulking Bright-rumped Attila that nonetheless stayed put for scope views by all. Next was a pair of Bat Falcons (rare in Nayarit) seen on our way to a little-travelled road from which we found Mexican Parrotlet, Citreoline Trogon, Ferruginous Pygmy-owl (clutching a small lizard!), Pale-billed Woodpecker, and Ivory-billed Woodcreeper. Less than an hour into the morning, the pressure was off for two showy endemics, Golden Vireo and Black-throated Magpie-jay, which granted stunning close-up views. As we stopped to turn back for the hotel, a male Blue Bunting and a noisy gang of Stripe-headed Sparrows competed for our attention with a group of San Blas jays. An afternoon walk to the nearby beach and lagoon yielded Least Grebe, Blue-footed Booby, Bare-throated Tiger-heron, and Northern Jacana in addition to several species of wintering ducks and waders. By day’s end we had tallied 110 species within 2km of the hotel and without setting foot in a motorized vehicle!

Day 3 Shortly after sunrise we were treated to a Russet-crowned Motmot less than 300m from the hotel. We then piled into the van for a drive up a dirt track to some wonderful old-growth forest less than 3km east San

Pancho. Morning highlights included Short-tailed Hawk, White-tipped Dove, Squirrel Cuckoo, Elegant Trogon, Lineated Woodpecker, Orange-billed Nightingale-thrush, Louisiana Waterthrush, and a completely unanticipated Kentucky Warbler far west of its normal winter range. After a short break, we drove north to La Peñita for lunch and a try at Gray-breasted Martin, which nests in town some years. Failing to find the martins, we nonetheless enjoyed a collection of Brown Pelicans, Magnificent Frigatebirds, and Heermann's Gulls squabbling over a pile of fish remains on the beach.

Day 4 Just after first light, we returned to the forest east of San Pancho, this time striking out in a different direction than we had walked the previous morning. New trip birds included a male Golden-crowned Emerald in full sunlight, Greater Pewee, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, and Boat-billed Flycatcher. In the afternoon, we headed back toward Puerto Vallarta to bird in the thorn scrub, where we were rewarded with good views of two male Orange-breasted Buntings, and for several of us, a glimpse of the seldom-seen Rosy Thrush-tanager, which also briefly burst into song. After dinner, we drove up a side road hoping for Mottled Owl. Although no Mottled Owls appeared, we were pleased to encounter three different Burrowing Owls in the road.

Day 5 Revisiting the site we had birded the first morning, we got great looks at Brown-crested Flycatcher, Happy Wren, and Bell's Vireo. Then, while most of us were deciding whether to watch a Citreoline Trogon or a Rose-throated Becard, Beth remarked "which falcon is that?" as she pointed in the direction opposite from where the rest of us were looking. Perched in a broken-topped palm tree in full sunlight was a gorgeous Laughing Falcon. Many digital images later, we headed to the beach for Snowy Plovers and more boobies, stopping along the way to watch one of the Bat Falcons, which was feeding on a rather large bat less than 150m from our vantage point. Leaving San Pancho at 10:30, we headed north to the birding mecca of San Blas, making a slight detour to the overlook at El Mirador del Aguila. We arrived at the overlook at 15:00 and had views of six Military Macaws within two minutes of exiting the van. Indeed, macaws were in view off and on for the next 1.5 hours, after which we continued to San Blas, arriving at our hotel at 17:25 with more than 150 species for the trip.

Day 6 Joined by local guide Manuel Lomelí, we birded near the village of Singayta in the morning and made a riverboat trip in the evening, finding 134 species for the day. Highlights at Singayta included Elegant Quail, Lilac-crowned Parrot, Willow Flycatcher (singing!), White-throated Flycatcher, Fan-tailed Warbler, Rusty-crowned Ground-sparrow, and Black-vented Oriole. Two male Northern Parulas among the many Tropical Parulas were far out of range. The evening boat trip was a special treat. We started out at 15:00 on Rio San Cristóbal, picking up the usual complement of waterbirds (many herons, Black Skimmers and waders). Then, we turned up the Rio Tovar, which is lined with mangroves that thin out as the water becomes less saline upriver. Before sundown, we had seen Crane Hawk, Common Black-hawk, Boat-billed Heron, many Green Kingfishers, a wide variety of wading birds, and a singing Mangrove (Yellow) Warbler. At sunset, a pair of Mottled Owls landed in the treetops next to us. Motoring slowly downriver past the owls, we saw no fewer than eight Northern Potoos and larger numbers of Lesser Nighthawks and Common Paraques. We also encountered a troop of White-nosed Coatis (*Nasua narica*) and two Bulldog (Fishing) Bats (*Noctilio leporinus*). Arriving back at the launching site at 19:30, we ended the evening with a pleasant meal in downtown San Blas.

Day 7 This morning we headed to the village of La Bajada, a drive of 20km from the hotel. The first stop at the edge of town yielded Berylline Hummingbirds in a flowering tree, our second Russet-crowned Motmot, and our first good look at Scrub Euphonia (though we'd heard them often). Walking a trail through a shade-coffee plantation above the village, we heard many chachalacas and got several good looks at Citreoline and Elegant Trogons. Golden-cheeked Woodpeckers and Yellow-winged Caciques were especially visible, and a lone Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was a nice surprise. Without question, the best birds of the morning were Gray-crowned Yellowthroat and Rosy-crowned Ant-tanager, each of which was seen well by almost everyone, albeit never for more than a few seconds at a time. We returned to San Blas for lunch and spent the late afternoon in dry fields near the shrimp ponds north of town, picking up Merlin, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Cassin's Kingbird, Eastern Phoebe, Vesper Sparrow, and singing Eastern Meadowlarks. We also encountered a Harris's Hawk that had just captured a Black-necked Stilt.

Day 8 Checking out of the hotel after breakfast, we spent an hour at the ponds just east of San Blas, tallying Semipalmated Plover, Marbled Godwit, Stilt Sandpiper, Gull-billed Tern, and Mangrove Swallow. We then headed north into Sinaloa, turning east up the Durango Highway to Capilla del Taxte, a small village nestled in the pine forest of the Sierra Madre Occidental and our home for the next three nights. We arrived in time to check into the hotel and then drive to the La Petaca Road, where we found Violet-crowned and Bumblebee Hummingbirds, Scott's Oriole, and Black-headed Siskin. As sunset drew near, we reluctantly returned to the van, accompanied by the haunting songs of Brown-backed Solitaires.



Red-headed Tanager

to the hotel. In the pines on the hotel grounds, we obtained good looks at Arizona Woodpecker, Hutton's Vireo, and Eastern Bluebird. Toward evening, we returned to La Petaca Road, finding a Plain-capped Starthroat, a rather surprising Red-naped Sapsucker, and an obliging Spotted Wren, which was a life bird for everyone!

Day 10 Our second major destination on the Durango Highway, Panuco Road, provided us with another memorable day of birding. Less than 15 minutes from the hotel, we spied a Yellow Grosbeak near a convenient pullout. A brief stop resulted in three males and one female. As we turned onto Panuco Road, a Pyrrhuloxia, Blue Mockingbird and Green-tailed Towhee came into view. Farther up the road, we alternately parked and walked for several kilometres, tallying close to 70 species. Highlights included several flocks of Military Macaws, a Colima Pygmy-owl, Nutting's Flycatcher, Black-capped Vireo, Flame-coloured Tanager, and five species of buntings. We returned to the hotel for lunch and then went back to Panuco Road for the afternoon, picking up our fourth Russet-crowned Motmot for the trip, a second Colima Pygmy-owl, and a female Broad-billed Hummingbird on a nest less than 1 metre off the ground. We had a pleasant dinner at Daniel's Restaurant in Copala and then returned to the hotel.

Day 11 This morning we returned to Barranca Rancho Liebre for three hours. Less than 600m up the trail, we spotted a skittish male Eared Quetzal, which eventually allowed us clear views. This species is seldom found here, and we were quite lucky to encounter it. We also found three Red Warblers and a Rufous-capped Brush-finch, species we'd missed the previous visit, and got additional close-up views of Mountain Trogon, White-striped Woodcreeper, Tufted Flycatcher, Golden-browed Warbler, Red-headed Tanager, and Green-striped Brush-finch. On the drive back to the hotel, we stopped for a flock of Tufted Jays that flew in front of us. The afternoon was taken up by our return to San Blas.

Day 12 After an early breakfast, we rendezvoused with celebrated boat guide Chencho for a five-hour trip up the Rio San Cristóbal. In addition to the normal complement of water birds (more Boat-billed Herons!), we got great looks at a pair of Snail Kites, scrutinized more than 5,000 Black-bellied Whistling-ducks, and were treated to a flock of Purplish-backed Jays in the mangroves. We also got quite close to a Clapper Rail, which provided some measure of consolation for the absence of Rufous-necked Wood-rail! During a late-afternoon walk to the jetty near the hotel, we added American Oystercatcher and Wandering Tattler to the trip list.



Boat-billed Heron

Day 13 Today we returned to San Pancho for our last night in the tropics, making a late-morning detour to a shade-coffee plantation along Mecatan Road. The site contained huge trees, and despite our late arrival, was still very birdy. An Acorn Woodpecker and male Baltimore Oriole added to our trip list, and singing

Elegant Trogons seemed to be around every bend in the trail. We arrived in San Pancho with 285 species under our belts and plenty of time to walk to the beach for sunset.

Day 14 For our last morning on Mexican soil, we drove a short way from San Pancho to a forest road that Jeff had only seen from afar until today. The morning got off to a great start when we spotted two Rufous-bellied Chachalacas in a fruiting tree less than 50m from the front door of our hotel! Our walk did not yield any new birds for the trip, but we had a relaxing morning with more than 60 species and great looks at Cinnamon Hummingbird, Northern Beardless-tyrannulet, San Blas Jay, Western Tanager, Yellow Grosbeak, and Blue Bunting. We departed San Pancho at 11:00 for the 45-minute drive to the Puerto Vallarta airport, thus concluding our visit to this wonderful part of the world.