Querétaro, Mexico area birding trip report

By Stephen & Sandra Brauning (stevebrauning@yahoo.com)

| March 2019 | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|--|-----|-----|
| Sun | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat |
| 17 Retreat, some birding around the hotel in Tequis- quiapan. | 18 Retreat, some birding around the hotel in Tequisquiapan. | 19 AM Depart Tequis early to the Jardín Botánico El Charco del Ingenio in San Miguel de Allende; lunch there, then to Presa Jalpan before dark; stay at Hotel Misión in Jalpan. | AM: bird Presa Jalpan PM Late lunch in town Then to Cascada El Chuveje, birding along the road. Return to Jalpan. | AM: check out and head to Cascada El Chuveje, birding along the road; then continue on the highway back to the airport for a 1:37PM flight out | | |

Introduction: My wife Sandra and I are both avid birders, and have birded a lot of places Latin America, having lived and traveled extensively in the region. Mexico has gotten special attention, for various reasons including the fact that we have other reasons to travel to Mexico. This trip was, like others, a combined trip to Mexco with a birding side trip. We are part of an international team and we had a retreat in Tequisquiapan in the state of Querétaro, central México, so we did a little birding around the retreat location and then took a few more days to bird. One thing we knew was that we had to cover various habitats and especially get up into the mountains. Even though it was another one of our short trips to Mexico, I am giving a thorough introduction to the our birding in Mexico.

Our approach to birding trips is to research and plan everything ourselves. We like to get the maximum number of species and lifers, of course, but are realistic in that if we don't get local or professional guides, we'll miss some birds. But we are not satisfied with a guide telling us "that's a", and "ticking" it off the list. We like the challenge of finding the birds ourselves on our own time-frame. Plus we are looking for economy, and since we speak Spanish, we can negotiate the logistics and enjoy the contacts with locals. Wth a life list of over 2,200 species of birds, all in the Americas, we are pretty confident in being able to handle the birds.

We feel a little like oddities among birders now-a-days since we are not photographers. You'll note that I don't put many photos on this or any other report that I have posted. I would rather spend my time finding and looking at the birds instead of focusing on getting the perfect shot. I get the use of cameras for ID purposes. That has some appeal but I have not got into it yet. Maybe if I could find the right camera... Naa, I just stick with the birds.

As far as our experience in Mexico and with Mexican birds, we have traveled together to Mexico eight times and Steve has made about four other trips, including having lived in the Yucatan peninsula for almost a year back in the '80s. Along with our other travels in the neo-tropics, we knew that we would see quite a few familiar species, and we had birded a little in Mexico City so had some experience.

Preparations: We booked our American Airlines flights to and from Querétaro; the hotel for our retreat was **Hotel Villa Florencia**, **Nautha 6**, **76750 Tequisquiapan**; and we rented a car on-line using www.economycarrentals.com: then we got one other hotel in the mountain town of Jalpan: it was Hotel Misión Jalpan which we got through Booking.com. It was very nice, right across from the town square. Parking was tough since there was a festival going on in the square.

We researched our birding mostly through trip reports, eBird, Google maps, and other internet sources. We didn't contract any guides, and even though we may miss some species this way, but we enjoy the challenge.

The Birds of Mexico and North Central America is the old standard field guide by Steven Howell, published by Oxford University Press in 1995, with 1010 pages. It is an important resource, although a little dated, very large and heavy, and it does not illustrate any migratory birds. We brought it along but generally did not carry in the field. We had the pocket field guide, Ber Van Perlo's Birds of Mexico and Central America, a Princeton Illustrated Checklist, published in 2006, which fits in the pocket but suffers from the opposite limitations: it's so small, that illustrations and maps tiny and information is minimal. Using both books was helpful. We also downloaded some bird songs from xeno canto.

Overall impressions of Mexico, logistics, and birding:

Mexico is such a large and diverse country with about 1,100 species of birds recorded, of which about 110 are endemic (according to Avibase – others list different numbers). The country hosts many other ne-tropical species as well, and many migrants from North American winter and/or pass through. It is large and diverse enough that it deserves many trips to really cover well.

The central highlands have a variety of habitats and some cross-over between North and Central America. Querétaro and Tequisquiapan are just over 1,800 meters above sea level (almost 6,100 feet), Jalpan is at 760 meters (2,500 ft), although the mountains surrounding Jalpan are over 2,500 meters or 8,200 feet above sea level. This is appealing for birding since dry chaparal and the highlands each have a slate of specialised species.

Mexico has a rich historical and cultural heritage that is celebrated and displayed all over. People are generally quite friendly and helpful, although somewhat more reserved than other parts of Latin America. And of course there's the food. It's abundant and reasonable almost anywhere you go. And, wow, it's so good!. Even after all these years of connecting with Mexico and its food, I still feel like I need a dictionary of Mexican food every time I'm there or even go to a Mexican restaurant. There's just so much! I love it! Different regions have gastronomic specialties and Querétaro is no exception. Eating while on the road can mean stopping at the many nice little restaurants, cafeterias, or street food venders, or for more remote areas and early morning birding, we often just stop at a "tortillería" or a supermarket and get a half kilo of tortillas (for a pitance), and eat them with peanut butter, cheese, salsa, jelly, or even "vacias", without anything, when they're really fresh. MMM!. ATMs (for getting pesos) are fairly common in the towns and easy to access, using credit cards is pretty easy and widespread, except in remote areas, then you need some cash to get by.

Travel is generally easy and the highways are excellent, although due to the very steep mountains some of the driving was downright hair raising.

We rarely encounter any other birders in Mexico, even at hotspots, in the national parks, or among the park personnel, or in the hotels which often have wonderful grounds.

Having a smart phone with a good plan helped with all kinds of communications, navigation, etc., for everything from normal phone calls, Google, Google maps, Whatsapp for messaging, etc. We live in the Dominican Republic and our cell phone is through a company called "Claro", which either operates in Mexico or has affiliates, so I had full service at very minimal charge. Just being able to call the car rental places, hotels and restaurants, was nice. If you don't have service in the country, try going to a cell phone store and buying a SIM card. Speaking Spanish helps as not many people speak English outside the tourist areas; if you don't handle Spanish, prepare your self with a bilingual dictionary, phrase guide, and/or Google Translator.

The climate varies from hot during the day to cool at night.

So here's a day-by-day report.

Sunday and Monday March 17 & 18: the retreat activites continued but we were able to get away on some short walks around **Tequisquiapan** and found some "magic trees" with nectar-bearing flowers. We also took some "birding pals" out. Here's a couple of photos and our list.





Birding pals

Magic trees

Bird lists: Tequisquiapan, Querétaro, Mexico

Locations: Hotel Villa Florencia and Claustro San Joaquin

Total # of Species: 32

| Species Name | # |
|--|-----|
| Rock Pigeon (Columba livia) | 8 |
| Inca Dove (Columbina inca) | 9 |
| White-winged Dove (Zenaida asiatica) | 4 |
| Violet-crowned Hummingbird (Amazilia violiceps) | 2 L |
| Great Egret (Ardea alba) | 5 |
| Cattle Egret (Bubulcus ibis) | 3 |
| Sharp-shinned Hawk (Accipiter striatus) | 1 |
| Broad-winged Hawk (Buteo platypterus) | 1 |
| Golden-fronted Woodpecker (Melanerpes aurifrons) | 7 |
| Vermilion Flycatcher (Pyrocephalus rubinus) | 9 |
| Cassin's Kingbird (Tyrannus vociferans) | 2 |
| Barn Swallow (Hirundo rustica) | 5 |

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| Bushtit (Psaltriparus minimus) | 10 |
|--|----|
| Ruby-crowned Kinglet (Regulus calendula) | 3 |
| Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (Polioptila melanura) | 1 |
| Bewick's Wren (Thryomanes bewickii) | 3 |
| European Starling (Sturnus vulgaris) | 14 |
| Clay-colored Thrush (Turdus grayi) | 9 |
| Cedar Waxwing (Bombycilla cedrorum) | 18 |
| House Sparrow (Passer domesticus) | 9 |
| House Finch (Haemorhous mexicanus) | 25 |
| Bullock's Oriole (Icterus bullockii) | 5 |
| Melodious Blackbird (Dives dives) | 8 |
| Great-tailed Grackle (Quiscalus mexicanus) | 9 |
| Orange-crowned Warbler (Leiothlypis celata) | 1 |
| Nashville Warbler (Leiothlypis ruficapilla) | 1 |
| Yellow-rumped Warbler (Setophaga coronata) | 30 |
| Black-throated Gray Warbler (Setophaga nigrescens) | 1 |
| Wilson's Warbler (Cardellina pusilla) | 3 |
| Western Tanager (Piranga Iudoviciana) | 2 |
| Indigo Bunting (Passerina cyanea) | 8 |
| Morelet's Seedeater (Sporophila morelleti) | 2 |

Tuesday March 19: we checked out, picked up a rental car, and drove west to San Miguel de Allende, a spectacular colonial city, where we visited the Jardín Botánico El Charco del Ingenio, on the northeast side of the city. It's a mostly dry scrub and thorn forest habitat, plus it as a decent sized reservoir. We picked up two lifers, Gray Flycatcher, an empid, and the Varied Bunting but it was a female so it did not have the spectacular colors. Another enjoyable sighting was the biggest concentration of Clay-colored Sparrows we've ever seen (22). This flock must have been migrating through. We missed a couple of targets, mainly hummingbirds. So be it. We were short on time and had to hit the road back east to near Querétaro and then north towards Jalpan.

| Location(s): Jardín Botánico El Charco del Ingenio, Sa Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico Total # of Species: 57 | an |
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| Species Name | # |
| Northern Shoveler (Spatula clypeata) | 85 |
| Mexican Duck (Anas diazi) | 45 |
| Green-winged Teal (Anas crecca) | 12 |
| Ruddy Duck (Oxyura jamaicensis) | 10 |
| Eared Grebe (Podiceps nigricollis) | 28 |
| Inca Dove (Columbina inca) | 5 |
| White-winged Dove (Zenaida asiatica) | 11 |
| Mourning Dove (Zenaida macroura) | 3 |
| Rivoli's Hummingbird (Eugenes fulgens) | 1 |
| Broad-billed Hummingbird (Cynanthus latirostris) | 6 |
| Black-necked Stilt (Himantopus mexicanus) | 23 |

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| Wilson's Warbler (Cardellina pusilla) | 5 |
|---|-----|
| Northern Cardinal (Cardinalis cardinalis) | 1 |
| Varied Bunting (Passerina versicolor) | 2 L |

The trip to Jalpan from Querétaro brings you past Bernal, where there is an impressive geological monument, claiming to be the world's largest monolith; and the town has been designated a "pueblo mágico", making it a tourist destination in its own rite. From there, a somewhat tortuous drive up the western slope is required, mostly through dry and barren habitat. Once you get to the top, the habitat changes; there is humid cloud forest as well as various other types of forest, depending on the elevation and which direction any given slope of the mountain faces.

We got down into the valley where Jalpan is located and headed right to the main birding area, the "Presa (reservoir) Jalpan". It's quite easy to bird, since there is a road running along both sides. The road on the side closer to the town is called "Camino al Camposanto" on Google maps. The first night we just drove to past where the pavement ended and went about a kilometer to the second switchback, but it was getting dark so we headed back to town and checked into the hotel. The hotel restaurant was a good choice: amazing food! And we turned in early so we could make an early start to go back to cover the Presa road better.

Wednesday March 20 this morning we went about 5 kilometers through prime habitat, until coming to a bridge that was not passable by car; there we got out and walked perhaps half a kilometer. The results were quite satisfactory; in fact, it was amazingly birdy, with a combination of resident species as well as migratories. Some highlights were lifers: White-faced Quail Dove was heard only; but several times and quite clearly. In spite of trying to track it down, it never flushed or showed itself. We also got the Crimson-collared Grosbeak, endemic to this mountain range, and Blue Bunting. Another interesting experience was the amazing abundance of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. They were everywhere.

| Location(s): Presa Jalpan Total # of Species: 70 | |
|--|-----|
| Species Name | # |
| Muscovy Duck (Cairina moschata) | 9 |
| Lesser Scaup (Aythya affinis) | 5 |
| Ruddy Duck (Oxyura jamaicensis) | 2 |
| Inca Dove (Columbina inca) | 4 |
| White-tipped Dove (Leptotila verreauxi) | 11 |
| White-faced Quail-Dove (Zentrygon albifacies) Heard only | 2 L |
| White-winged Dove (Zenaida asiatica) | 8 |
| Groove-billed Ani (Crotophaga sulcirostris) | 1 |
| Squirrel Cuckoo (Piaya cayana) | 2 |
| White-eared Hummingbird (Hylocharis leucotis) | 5 |
| American Coot (Fulica americana) | 16 |
| Neotropic Cormorant (Phalacrocorax brasilianus) | 36 |
| Great Blue Heron (Ardea herodias) | 2 |
| Great Egret (Ardea alba) | 10 |
| Snowy Egret (Egretta thula) | 25 |
| Tricolored Heron (Egretta tricolor) | 2 |
| Black Vulture (Coragyps atratus) | 4 |
| Turkey Vulture (Cathartes aura) | 26 |

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| Osprey (Pandion haliaetus) | 1 |
| Red-tailed Hawk (Buteo jamaicensis) | 1 |
| Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (Glaucidium brasilianum) | 1 |
| Golden-fronted Woodpecker (Melanerpes aurifrons) | 2 |
| Ladder-backed Woodpecker (Dryobates scalaris) | 1 |
| Olivaceous Woodcreeper (Sittasomus griseicapillus) | 1 |
| Tufted Flycatcher (Mitrephanes phaeocercus) | 4 |
| Greater Pewee (Contopus pertinax) | 2 |
| Western Wood-Pewee (Contopus sordidulus) | 1 |
| Vermilion Flycatcher (Pyrocephalus rubinus) | 2 |
| Dusky-capped Flycatcher (Myiarchus tuberculifer) | 3 |
| Great Kiskadee (Pitangus sulphuratus) | 5 |
| Social Flycatcher (Myiozetetes similis) | 4 |
| Cassin's Vireo (Vireo cassinii) | 2 |
| Blue-headed Vireo (Vireo solitarius) | 1 |
| Warbling Vireo (Vireo gilvus) | 2 |
| Yellow-green Vireo (Vireo flavoviridis) | 1 |
| Green Jay (Cyanocorax yncas) | 8 |
| Black-crested Titmouse (Baeolophus atricristatus) | 1 |
| Bank Swallow (<i>Riparia riparia</i>) | 5 |
| Ruby-crowned Kinglet (Regulus calendula) | 4 |
| Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (Polioptila caerulea) estimated | 100 |
| House Wren (<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>) | 1 |
| Bewick's Wren (Thryomanes bewickii) | 1 |
| Spot-breasted Wren (Pheugopedius maculipectus) | 2 |
| Blue Mockingbird (Melanotis caerulescens) | 11 |
| Brown-backed Solitaire (Myadestes occidentalis) | 6 |
| Clay-colored Thrush (Turdus grayi) | 15 |
| Scrub Euphonia (Euphonia affinis) | 5 |
| Hooded Oriole (Icterus cucullatus) | 8 |
| Audubon's Oriole (Icterus graduacauda) | 6 |
| Great-tailed Grackle (Quiscalus mexicanus) | 21 |
| Northern Waterthrush (Parkesia noveboracensis) | 1 |
| Black-and-white Warbler (Mniotilta varia) | 3 |
| Orange-crowned Warbler (Leiothlypis celata) | 2 |
| Nashville Warbler (Leiothlypis ruficapilla) | 3 |
| MacGillivray's Warbler (Geothlypis tolmiei) | 4 |
| Common Yellowthroat (Geothlypis trichas) | 1 |
| American Redstart (Setophaga ruticilla) | 3 |
| Tropical Parula (Setophaga pitiayumi) | 6 |
| Hermit Warbler (Setophaga occidentalis) | 1 |
| Black-throated Green Warbler (Setophaga virens) | 3 |
| Rufous-capped Warbler (Basileuterus rufifrons) | 14 |
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| Golden-crowned Warbler (Basileuterus culicivorus) | 1 |
|---|-----|
| Wilson's Warbler (Cardellina pusilla) | 18 |
| Hepatic Tanager (Piranga flava) | 3 |
| Western Tanager (Piranga ludoviciana) | 8 |
| White-winged Tanager (Piranga leucoptera) | 4 |
| Crimson-collared Grosbeak (Rhodothraupis celaeno) | 7 L |
| Northern Cardinal (Cardinalis cardinalis) | 1 |
| Black-headed Grosbeak (Pheucticus melanocephalus) | 1 |
| Blue Bunting (Cyanocompsa parellina) | 2 L |

That afternoon we headed back up the mountain to another hotspot, "Cascada El Chuveje"; we got there a little late again so after a short walk, we headed back and planned to return the next morning.

Thursday March 21 we had to check out and hit the road since it was our last day in Mexico. By leaving early we got to Cascada El Chuveje early and had the place mostly to ourselves. We never actually got to the waterfall but spent both visits combing the entrance road, parking area, and the early part of the trail to the waterfall. It was not as productive as we had hoped but not bad. No lifers but some nice birds, especially the Painted Redstart, a very lively and strikingly beautiful bird.

| Location Cascada El Chuveje, Querétaro, Mexico Total # of Species: 37 Species Name | # |
|--|----|
| Inca Dove (Columbina inca) | 3 |
| White-winged Dove (Zenaida asiatica) | 2 |
| Vaux's Swift (Chaetura vauxi) | 11 |
| Blue-throated Mountain-gem (Lampornis clemenciae) | 3 |
| White-eared Hummingbird (Hylocharis leucotis) | 2 |
| Turkey Vulture (Cathartes aura) | 9 |
| Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (Sphyrapicus varius) | 1 |
| Acorn Woodpecker (Melanerpes formicivorus) | 5 |
| Bat Falcon (Falco rufigularis) | 1 |
| Greater Pewee (Contopus pertinax) | 2 |
| Dusky-capped Flycatcher (Myiarchus tuberculifer) | 1 |
| Blue-headed Vireo (Vireo solitarius) | 1 |
| Green Jay (Cyanocorax yncas) | 4 |
| Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (Polioptila caerulea) | 18 |
| House Wren (Troglodytes aedon) | 1 |
| Cactus Wren (Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus) | 2 |
| Blue Mockingbird (Melanotis caerulescens) | 1 |
| Brown-backed Solitaire (Myadestes occidentalis) | 4 |
| Swainson's Thrush (Catharus ustulatus) | 1 |
| Clay-colored Thrush (Turdus grayi) | 5 |
| Gray Silky-flycatcher (Ptiliogonys cinereus) | 18 |
| Scrub Euphonia (Euphonia affinis) | 2 |
| Elegant Euphonia (Euphonia elegantissima) | 1 |

| House Finch (Haemorhous mexicanus) | 2 |
|---|----|
| Rufous-capped Brushfinch (Atlapetes pileatus) | 1 |
| Orchard Oriole (Icterus spurius) | 1 |
| Hooded Oriole (Icterus cucullatus) | 1 |
| Black-and-white Warbler (Mniotilta varia) | 1 |
| Nashville Warbler (Leiothlypis ruficapilla) | 1 |
| Tropical Parula (Setophaga pitiayumi) | 1 |
| Yellow-rumped Warbler (Setophaga coronata) | 1 |
| Black-throated Green Warbler (Setophaga virens) | 3 |
| Wilson's Warbler (Cardellina pusilla) | 4 |
| Painted Redstart (Myioborus pictus) | 5 |
| Hepatic Tanager (Piranga flava) | 2 |
| Flame-colored Tanager (Piranga bidentata) | 4 |
| Black-headed Grosbeak (Pheucticus melanocephalus) | 1- |

As we headed back we took some time to scout for birds: first, up in the cloud forest we stopped at a particually sharp hairpin about two kilometers past the town of Pinal de Amoles, where the habitat looked good and picked up Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Yellow-eyed Juncos, Crescent-chested Warblers, a Townsend's Warbler and a Painted Redstart.

Then after getting down the steeper slopes, we stopped a couple of locations and found a small flock of Varied Buntings, so we got some good looks at a male. Such stunning, rich colored plumage! Also seen were Common Raven and Verdin.

Then at another spot where there is a large parking area next to the highway overlooking a mixed cactus and thorn tree habitat, we had a nice little list, including a lifer: Lucifer's Hummingbird.

| Location: Ruta 100, Querétaro, MX (20.775, -99.906) Total # of Species: 10 Species Name | # |
|---|---|
| Common Ground Dove (Columbina passerina) | 6 |
| White-winged Dove (Zenaida asiatica) | 1 |
| Lucifer Hummingbird (Calothorax lucifer) | 1 |
| Violet-crowned Hummingbird (Amazilia violiceps) | 1 |
| Ladder-backed Woodpecker (Dryobates scalaris) | 1 |
| Say's Phoebe (Sayornis saya) | 1 |
| Verdin (Auriparus flaviceps) | 3 |
| Bewick's Wren (Thryomanes bewickii) | 2 |
| Cactus Wren (Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus) | 1 |
| House Finch (Haemorhous mexicanus) | 3 |

That was about it! We did see some other birds along the roads. But it was time to leave again.