GUATEMALA APRIL 2024 – TROGONQUEST IX

Participants – Jules Eden and Duncan Bulling

Guide – Josue de Leon Lux from :

www.guatemalabirdingadventures.com

Why ?

After the ‘’ Black-throated Trogon disaster of November 2023”, see previous trip reports, it has now come to take Trogonquests into mine own hands and beat the scientists and those IOC splitters at their game.

I thought I had one left, Cinnamon-Rumped, up Malaysia, but it turns out that there’s two in Central America that could easily be split as well.

- **Elegant Trogon – seen during a Covid “Breakout Birding Tour” in Chihuahua. This has a coppery brown tail, a distribution in Northern Central America and a slighty different call from the Elegants in the South, which have a**

green tail and a whole chunk of that isthmus which separates them from the North.

- **Resplendent Quetzal – up Costa Rica where most birders see them, it's a subspecies *costaricensis.* In Guatemala, where the currency is named after them, towns are named after them and perhaps 10% of all newborn children are named after them it is *mocinnus.* A longer tail here in Guatemala which makes the Mayan head-dresses a bit more spectacular than anything on offer in a Costa Rican or Panamanian museum if you happen to go visit one on your bird tour.**

Anyways, better to get these birds before some PhD student ruins my quest for all things Trogon.

<u>DAY 0 – ARRIVAL AND TRANSFER TO LOS TARRALES</u>

This is going to be a short tour. Josue reckons that 7 days and 6 nights will suffice for all our targets. Young Duncan has come out and stayed in Antigua for a hefty 10 days to "learn Spanish" before my arrival. His days were mainly spent in El Finca del Pilar seeing hummers and warblers, which I would hopefully get later on the tour.

Josue is bang on time at the Guatemala City hotel I was booked into for the run to Antigua and on to Los Tarrales.

We had to pick up Duncs in Antigua on the way, but there would be problems. It's an Easter Sunday, and apparently the whole of Catholic faithed Central America drops in to this city for the festival of flowers on every street, with a marching band at night. Roads were zoned off, and the typical Guatemalan trick of having 3 roads with the same address has thrown Josue.

He leaves me by a small wooded park, to find Duncan.

In the time taken to find him I see a GRAY SILKY-FLYCATHER in a tree in the small wooded area.

First newbie – and Josue has found my birding partner carrying a rucksack the size of big dog. Wheelie luggage man, leave the Bergens to the SAS.

This is a pre-day to the tour, just a ride to Tarrales, but Josue is stopping for every bird.

Elegant Euphonia, BUSHY-CRESTED JAY, Western Tanager, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat are all seen on a couple of roadside stops.

I missed the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher by being in the back seat – but hey! Texas one day, no need to get disappointed.

It's a 2 hour drive to Los Tarrales, and Josue makes sure we are roomed-up and he has to go home as we officially start tomorrow. The charge for the 2 hotel pick up and transfer is $150, which is pretty reasonable considering the timing and distance.

The rooms aren't available til 3pm so Duncs and I go a birding in the now warmer part of the day.

The trails around Tarrales are easy and very birdy. We head to the lake and get Cinnamon Hummingbird, Morrelet's Seedeater and a WHITE-BELLIED CHACHALACA. Spot-crowned Woodcreeper precedes a Collared Trogon and PACIFIC PARAKEETS. This is the spot for Yellow-naped Parrots too, plenty flying around, as are White-throated Thrushes.

We called it a day when the rooms were finally available.

Los Tarrales is a proper working Coffee Finca. For over 100 years coffee has been grown, so where you stay now, is a few rooms converted to tourists, many buildings with working staff, a football pitch and even a small shop for the coffee pickers to buy a beer. Around the main Finca – it's a retro 50's throwback.

Old cars and tractors. Black and white tiled bathrooms and shared dining as per cards on the table.

We dined with a charming Canadian girl and her Guatemalan boyfriend. She a digital nomad, he from a family of transfer specialists for the tourists in Antigua.

Our discussion of all things political was ruined by me hearing a Mottled Owl in the garden. A newbie for Duncs – quickly seen in his thermal camera. Tomorrow we start the trip.

DAY 1 – LOS TARRALES

The trick here in the morning is to get up early and turn the coffee perculators on. The staff have loaded them up ready for you to hit the green button whilst using the Wifi to call family before you go a birding.

Josue is with us at 6 a.m. and we set off for the local birds.

We take the trail up the hill from the Finca, a right towards the plantation and quickly are on to Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Rufous-breasted Spinetail and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher.

Yellow-olive Flatbill precedes a "squonk". Then another one.

Josue gets all antsy – sounds like a guan.

And some more playback and squonking – in comes a HIGHLAND GUAN.

It ran over the trail in front of us. It turns out that his last client had this as number 2 on her list and missed it five times. We got it this short time. Goes to show – "Birding Rule #2 – The more you want it – the less you see it"

I think it's a pheromone thing.

We go "off-piste" for a bit to some grassy area amongst the coffee bushes. Spot-breasted Wren, Chestnut-capped Warbler and a Barred Antshrike are seen on the way to the grass. And with a bit of playback up pop our next targets. PREVOST'S GROUND-SPARROW.

A nice pair that hang around for a bit, and would have provided great photos – if any of us actually had a camera. As the next newbies were located higher up the mountain, we walked back to the Finca and refuelled on the endless supply of home grown coffee before taking the car to get some height.

GUATEMALAN TYRANNULET showed first – closely followed by the EMERALD-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRD.

As it was our first day, every bird was a Trip Tick – Short-tailed Hawk, Warbling Vireo, MacGillvary's Warbler, Green Shrike-vireo and Ochre-bellied Flycatcher were some of the cooler ones.

Every meal is a joy here at Tarrales – buffet lunch was a chicken lasagne, and we got a bit of rest before the afternoon's birdage.

The destination, about 40 minutes away is known as La Playa – but there is no beach, just dry trails up to a forest edge. Josue knows this patch well, and says it cannot be birded too early due to the heat – so a 4pm arrival is about the best time.

Band-backed Wren and Blue and White Mockingbird are first up, then with a bit of teasing we pull in a BAR-WINGED ORIOLE. Very nice – as is the RUFOUS SABREWING a minute later.

We go up to the treeline for another hummer, but it's a no show, however a GUATEMALAN PYGMY-OWL comes in as we are playing it to attract a few smaller passerines. A Rusty Sparrow hops around near the car and as dusk is falling it is time to return for some night birding near the Finca.

Dunc swings back to the room to get the Therminator – but it's not really needed as the Black and White Owl and Northern Potoo are at their usual spots.

A great Day 1. Tomorrow will be more physical.

DAY 2 – SANTIAGO de ATTITLAN and MIRADOR REY TEPAPAL

It's a fair drive to the lake, but as Los Tarrales is such a nice base, we don't mind the extra hour or so to get there and back. The mirador is half way up the mountain that sides onto this famous lake. Around the car park, though we get a NORTHERN EMERALD TOUCANET and a bunch of American Wood warblers.

The hike begins.

And my whingeing!

Sadly my body was never constructed for steep uphills. Thin little legs and an abdomen fuelled by 40 years of British beer. So progress is slow as I hold up the fitter and less dysmorphic Duncan.

The trail is very up and down but if I can do it, so can you dear birder.

However soon the fatigue and muscle cramps are forgotten as, with the help of a local guide – Juan, we start reeling in the targets.

AZURE-RUMPED TANAGER is seen fairly quickly, then with Juan's local knowledge we call in a beautiful YELLOW-THROATED NIGHTINGALE-THRUSH. [this used to be the Spotted one as seen in South America but split in 2021]

This bird sits for a long time singing, a wonderful glowing yellow against the dank brown forest understory. Just the lift we need for the next bit of long uphill.

Josue gets to the first trogon stakeout but here instead is our first view of the BLUE-THROATED MOTMOT. Surely the best of all motmots. And my last one too.

On to another view point, hopefully more trogon-ey and we think we can hear our target – so mucho mountainside scanning – with a female BLUE-CROWNED CHLOROPHONIA to keep us amused.

Then a shout from Juan – he has been up the mountain a bit farther and has met some more "birders" who have had it.

There starts the usual run up and down the mountainside until Josue gets one in scope view. RESPLENDANT QUETZAL ssp mocinnus, altogether bigger, bouncier and more Guatemalan than its Costa Rican cousin.

Gotcha bird scientists. You can split 'em but it's in my bag now!

We saw 3 males in the end – and at one point, all in one binocular view. Truly a never to be forgotten moment.

Just the walk back up and out now – though with less whining from me this time.

We lunched later at Hotel Bambu on the lakeshore. Theres a couple of hummers in the garden worth loitering for.

AZURE-CROWNED HUMMINGBIRD and the absolutely stonking BLUE-TAILED HUMMINGBIRD. The latter when posed on a sunlit twig is a wonderful meld of several blue hues going into green and gold on its back. My new favourite hummer.

It has been a massive day so far and the fitting end was a trip back to La Playa for what we missed yesterday – and the roll continues – SLENDER SHEARTAIL in the orange flowers in the dry high fields.

Back to Los Tarrales for dinner and "Gallo" beers.

<u>DAY 3 – LOS ROBLES and on to FUERTES GEORGINAS</u>

Los Robles is Josue's hood. You can see his house from parts of the trail, so if he can't get this bird – no one can.

He does very quickly – BELTED FLYCATCHER shows on the first peep of playback. A short walk also produces CHESTNUT-SIDED SHRIKE-VIREO. One bird, 2 hyphens.

Belted Flycatcher

On the way back to the car Duncan spots a swallow flock. Yes it's the BLACK-CAPPED SWALLOW we need.

Josue doesn't have time to pop in and see his family, despite the proximity as we have a 4 hour drive to our next lodgings.

This is a "hit and run" tour – no hotel bookings made in advance, but we move according to what we have seen, which makes the trip more fluid and maximises the chances for all targets.

Fuentes Georginas is a high elevation area of hot springs with about 10 rooms attached. The road up there from the main road is very birdy so worth taking time on the wooded bends in the road to stop and listen.

We call in a Mountain Trogon and BLACK-THROATED JAY. More US Wood warblers precede RUFOUS-COLLARED THRUSH and a RUFOUS-BROWED WREN.

A Northern Flicker shows and one day this might well be a Guatemalan Flicker – so bear that in mind. Finally before we arrive at F.G. we see the CINNAMON-BELLIED FLOWERPIERCER.

Not a bad haul and we haven't even got through the gates yet.

We unpack after check in. Each room has a stone bathtub which you can fill from the hot spring water that flows through this area.

Except today – they are cleaning the pipes. You win on the birds, but lose at the rest of life!

The afternoon brings Black Thrush, common by the pools and a SINGING QUAIL flushed by Josue after it strung us along for 30 minutes. UNICOLOURED JAYS are also frequent around the valley that runs down in front of the reception building.

A great day is completed by a better evening as a FULVOUS OWL comes in to the call 3 feet from our rooms.

Time to celebrate a double figure newbie day with cold beers in the hot water springs. [You can use the facilities here at night as they haven't yet adopted ridiculous western Health and Safety measures and just allow you not to be daft enough to drown yourself]

<u>DAY 4 FUENTES GEORGINAS to CUCHUMATANES</u>

Ok – its Guan-time.

They way it works here is to get up just before dawn, and hope they work their way down the valley to an eye level view from the car park area. You give it until about 8 a.m. and if it is a no-show, then you have the Hell-hike up the mountain to find a fruiting tree up there.

Josue's stats are : 75% of views are "Hell-hike", and 25% of the time it's a "Carpark Guan".

Gates don't open until 8 a.m. so it is quiet for 2 hours to allow you to look in peace.

Josue gets me onto a PINK-HEADED WARBLER during the first hours wait. Then for the sake of our sanity [as by now every pigeon flying looks like a guan!] we have a quick stroll out of the car park and get GREEN-THROATED MOUNTAIN-GEM and a surprise GARNET-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD.

We give it to about 9 a.m. but it is still a guan-free zone.

We go for the hike up. Except I don't. Due to my lack of a defibrillator and my poor shape I will leave it for the fitter guys.

It turned out to be a wise call. No sooner had they set off, then the fog came tumbling down the valley leading to zero visibility by 9.30.

We RV'ed at 10 and made the executive decision to bale from here and head 7 hours north west to the super highlands of Cuchumatanes. The hotel here at the hot springs was also fully booked for tonight!

Josue is a machine. Driving these Guatemalan roads is pretty tricky. As soon as you pass one slow long truck, another lies in wait half a mile away. Like a lot of Central American countries, the trains were phased out at the behest of politicians with "road haulage interests". There was once a train line from Pacific to Atlantic here, but sadly it is just rusted metal now.

We make good time though and finally arrive with a couple of hours of daylight left for some altitude birding.

BROAD-TAILED HUMMINGBIRD is the first of 2 new hummers. The second being RIVOLI'S HUMMINGBIRD. Throw in a Pine Siskin, Yellow-eyed Junco and female GOLDMANN'S WARBLER and it's not a bad haul before we set off night birding.

Estaban is the man here. He has been involved in all things birdy in this area for years and has 2 self-catering apartments on his land for birders to stay. He leads us out into the night to bird the high pine forests. After 3 or 4 silent areas we get a response. Duncan is doing his Thermal camera thing and fairly soon we get UNSPOTTED SAW-WHET OWL. My second since getting one in Costa Rica. Split 'em, that's what I say…

Night time is spent fully clothed under several blankets. It drops to 2 degrees under in these parts.

<u>DAY 5 CUCHUMATANES to FUENTES GEORGINAS</u>

Is it only Day 5 – seems like we have been here a lot longer!

Josue and Duncs brew the morning coffee and we head out at first light to a boulder covered high plain near the breakfast restaurant.

Estaban does the playback and soon gets a ROCK WREN. A very different subspecies here in Guatemala than other parts. A good bird for me.

Rock Wren

Breakfast is a sort of Mountain Cowboy affair with cheesy tortilla and hot chocolate – a nice change from huevos revueltos con frijoles.

Now for the mountain megas. This is Estaban's area of expertise and from all the pictures in his hacienda, he is the man to find it.

OCELLATED QUAIL is heard, stalked and scoped in the rocky ploughed fields in rapid time leaving us free to get to another area for BLACK-CAPPED SISKIN.

Another steeper pine forest trail, near where we saw the owl last night gets us an AZURE-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD as well as subspecies Stellar's Jay and Yellow Grosbeak – which here is orange!

One more stop at some more messy old cultivated stone-walled fields brings us a perfect male Goldmann's Warbler. Currently in the Yellow-rumped Warbler file, along with the Audubon's. This bird is non-migratory, mostly black and now split. By me, anyway!

Mr and Mrs Goldmann Warbler

That's it for Cuchumatanes, the plan is to drive 7 hours back to Fuentes Georginas to have another shot at the guan.

By the way. On this sort of tour, where poor Josue has had 2 seven hour drives in as many days, the onus is on you the birder to keep the chat chatting, the entertainment at a frenzy and the driver as alert as possible at all times.

A previous Hutton's Vireo in La Playa leads to our riff to keep Josue as awake as possible.

From that bird to a Grace's Warbler…can you name your best ever "Test Cricket Bird XI"?

Answers below!

DAY 6 FUENTES GEORGINAS to HELODERMA RESERVE

Duncs is up a therming well before dawn – he has gotten very expert with this device now and gets onto a Mexican Whip-poor-will flight calling at the back of the car park.

As dawn comes, the good news is that the skies are clear – i.e. no fog, the guanistas worst enemy. Duncan starts picking up larger bird movements with the camera but not enough light to get any I.D. As the light improves, so does the expectation – we have been pretty lucky with our targets thus far, so let's hope it stays that way.

After an hour, Josue goes down the hill in case there's activity by the lower pools. I thought I saw a big black and white flash across the valley, but more likely the early symptoms of "Guan Madness"

Duncan is using the combo of thermal camera, bins and scope, but getting a little frustrated as he moves from angle to angle to see the heat spots.

Anyway, time to get comfortable. There's a little ledge I can sit on, a pocket full of cigarettes and sweets, let the search continue. We only have an hour until we have to walk up the mountain.

And in a couple of minutes – guess who sees a black and white big bird half way across the valley. Me!

HORNED GUAN

From the car park – zero uphill walking! Yaay.

[I only blow my trumpet here as on most bird tours I am between the driver and the lady with cataracts on the "Seen species first League Table" – nice to get one for the team for once]

We walkie-talkie Josue to come back up from the pools with his better scope – and the guan gives us half an hour of scope filling views before flying down the valley.

There is a God!

Duncs and Josue go down the slope to try to get more views – and do.

I make a half-hearted attempt as there really are some birds that should only be seen at a distance via a scope, not in your face.

Coursers for example – best seen through a shimmering haze.

Albatrosses too – up close, ugly. At a distance – beautiful.

See the photos, make your choice.

Proper Guan distance

Too close

So what now? We had cleaned up the highlands, where next on this “hit and run”?

Josue’s face fell a little as there still was my main target. The trogon was located another 7 hour drive away, way East in the Dry Forest.

3 seven hourers in 3 days. Just as well he loves hearing Duncan and my Cricket Birds conversation! Or not.

We headed off and somehow made it to the access trail for the Heloderma Reserve and meet Don Gilberto who runs it all with an hour left of daylight.

And we got it, in the same day as the Horned Guan, an ELEGANT TROGON. Male and female flitting near the roadside.

This trip has made up for all the other trips where targets are missed or it’s a disaster like you get malaria or leishmaniasis or something. An absolute clean up for me. Duncs needs a bit more though.

We are straight into night birding now – Lesser Nighthawks in the sky.

A Middle-American Screech-owl and Pacific Screech-owl are seen on the access road.

Then a schlep up a couple of hillsides, now though in the warmth, gets us a BUFF-COLLARED NIGHTJAR.

The accommodation here is a perfect place.

3 rooms – one bathroom, but so silent after busy roads. It is 3 kilometres from any other human habitation and you sit for an evening drinking Gallo beers from the stocked fridge reminiscing about today's hits. Once again – Guan and Trogon in one day. I went to bed a happy man.

DAY 7 HELODERMA to GUATEMALA CITY

A joy not to have slept fully clothed. We were up for 6 a.m. to get better views of the trogon and Duncan on to stuff he needed.

Elegant Trogons were plentiful and playful, along with Nutting's Flycatcher, Varied Bunting, Blue Grosbeak, 2 Motmots – Turquoise-crowned and Russet-crowned, and even a Spot-breasted Oriole.

I peeled off back to base as there was the best Wifi we had encountered anywhere in Guatemala at the Heloderma Lodge. I had to call my wife. OK, no- my footy team were playing back home and I needed to see the result.

Duncs and Josue nailed the Lesser Ground-Cuckoo and a Canivet's Emerald without me.

And then came back and cooked breakfast – you have to bring your own supplies here.

Heloderma Huevos

Duncan, Josue and Don Gilberto

Don Gilberto showed us their captive Heloderma before we went. Apparently it is poisonous. I guess if bitten, not if you choose to eat it.

Don Gilberto's Heloderma

Thanks to the incredible Wifi here Duncan has booked our nights in Guatemala City, but there was one more stop before the trip ended.

Just outside of the capital there lies a rather smart gated community. A friend of Josue's friend etc has put him in touch with a really nice photographer who has hummer feeders off his 4th floor apartment.

We have seen most before but the Sparkling-tailed Hummer does not appear. One of our misses along with the Wine-throated – but that is a time of year thing. Best in December.

A short drive to our airport hotel and it is goodbye to Josue.

An amazing trip – 6 nights and 7 days to get what some tours take twice the time to get.

There was a post-script Day 8 as Duncan was smart enough to figure out the Uber here in Guatemala City and we went back to the hummer guy, Gilberto the next day and nailed Buffy-crowned Wood-Partridge [he feeds them by throwing bananas off his balcony] and a lucky MEXICAN VIOLETEAR.

An incredible trip.

I recommend Josue and his company to everyone.

Jules Eden

CRICKET BIRDS XI

Alistair COOK’S PETREL

Sir Len HUTTON’S VIREO

Dean SMITH’S LONGSPUR

Sir Viv RICHARD’S PIPIT

Ian BELL’S VIREO

Alistair STEWART’S ISLAND SHAG

W.G GRACE’S WARBLER

Kane WILLIAMSON’S SAPSUCKER

Wally HAMMOND’S FLYCATCHER

Malcolm MARSHALL’S IORA

Angus FRASER’S SUNBIRD

If you can do better, mail me.

Los Tarrales coffee