

Puerto Vallarta Mexico, Birding Trip Report, November 2017

Beata and I spent a week on beach holiday in Nuevo Vallarta, just North of Puerto Vallarta from 17th to 24th Nov 2017. This was a package holiday we booked via Tui, rebranded Thomson Holidays, and staying in the Rui Palace Hotel. The hotel itself was like being on a different planet, food was unbelievable and there was even free booze in the rooms. There were a few negative remarks about items stolen from rooms and problems with the swim up bar on Trip Advisor, but we didn't experience or smell any problems. Beata even went paragliding off the beach, although we didn't manage to sit through the whole of the Michael Jackson tribute show, as was targeted at a different audience.

After visiting Costa Rica the previous year, we chose Mexico not really knowing what to expect. The Nuevo Vallarta Area is virtually a North American enclave, North of Puerto Vallarta, which in itself was as much as a culture shock as Mexico itself –safe, and all the cars were clean. Not that there was anything bad in this, as everyone we met, whether from the US, Canada or Mexico was very friendly, and I got the impression that some of the American tourists would have paid good money for me to talk / read to them in my best BBC accent. We were upset to discover how much the hotel staff were paid, and did after this try to be generous with tips.

Guides

I had planned to hire a guide for at least one day but the one that responded wanted \$190 for a five hour trip. After taking the painful decision to cough up, I tried to move this forward by e- mail, but on top of this charge, they refused to come to the hotel, saying they would pick me up outside the bakery in the town of Bucerias, about an hour walk from my hotel in the dark or another \$25 taxi ride. I half expected to be asked to wear a red carnation in my lapel, carry a copy of "The Times" from the previous day and respond to the question "It is unseasonably cold in Leningrad for the time of year" upon meeting them. Navigating the route there in the dark to a location I hadn't heard of didn't hold much appeal, this made me lose confidence in them and after an exchange of e-mails of deteriorating tone, I gave up.

Birding

This is undoubtedly a biodiverse and bird rich area, but joining an organised tour would probably be the best way of getting the most from this. There seemed to be lack of recent trip reports, most were at least 10 years old, from the area, which suggested that freelancing had become unpopular, presumably due to security issues. I did find more information about birding in the area on the web after I returned. There is a lot in the media about violence in Mexico, but we didn't encounter any problems. This state, Jalisco, seems to be one of the better ones in Mexico safety wise. We did see a lot of Police around and they were as well equipped as any military unit. As we were all inclusive we didn't venture much from the hotel as the prices were high for excursions / car rental, due to the collapse of the pound against the dollar, which everything was priced in, and also, this was a beach holiday for Beata, not a full on birding trip.

Most of the birding was done in the lightly wooded area just over the road from the hotel, and accessed via a brief 5 minute walk. This was very productive and allowed me to find my own birds, and be in the field at dawn, critical in the tropics, after a swift coffee in the all night bar. This invariably produced frustrations with unknown species, but as I slowly got my eye in, I began to work out the local birds or at the very least photograph them for later identification. I did find this type of birding immensely satisfying though, as it was like starting all over again. Still a lot of birds were probably missed, and a return trip would be worthwhile. I also walked along the access road of the resort towards PV, passing a small roundabout, a pool with "Beware of Crocodiles" sign up to the

main highway, and taking my life in my hands, crossing it at a sprint to view an amazingly productive pool on the middle of the intersection. The crocs had apparently vacated the pool, but it's wise to be sensible around wetlands, which some of the resort workers weren't.

We did have two excursions from the hotel, both by bus, which took a long time, particularly on the way back. The bus stop was outside the hotel taking us as far as Walmart – a prominent local land mark, and then hence downtown, which was easy on the way there, and took ages on the way back. The first was to get Beata to a Catholic Church for the weekly service, and the second for a trip to the Botanical Gardens. The Church service was interesting as the building was open fronted and there seemed to be a wedding going on every 20 minutes, either American couples, or in the other case, a devastatingly beautiful Mexican girl marrying a local lounge lizard. They were obviously running weddings on the "Stack them high, sell them cheap" principle.

The trip to the Botanical Gardens was well worth it, and I wanted to go back as the entrance ticket is valid for 2 days, but it took 3 buses and about 3 hours each way to cover the 25KM or so to the site, which was an experience but also a pain. Most of the birds here were seen around the well-stocked bird table at the café restaurant and hummingbird feeders. The bird table itself was an eye opener given the colour and variety of the species it was attracting. We walked the tracks but didn't see much and most of the trip reports we read seem to score at least half a dozen more quality species here than we did. However what we did see was very good. I did make my realise that whilst this was a beautiful area and again bird rich, the Botanic garden was possibly the only place this forest could be reasonably accessed, without bush bashing or birding from one of the very few roads or tracks.

<https://www.vbgardens.org/>

Looking on Google earth I realised we should have tried the area to the North of Bucerias as this was the closest access to wild country, and probably doable by bus, cab or even a long, determined walk.

References:-

Best report for the area, naturally only found after I returned. However reassuring as it had a good degree of overlap with what I had seen myself, although enough "deltas" to make me want to go back.

<http://maybank.tripod.com/Mexico/Jalisco-Nayarit-01-2006.htm#TRIP>

<http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/mexico/mexico16/west-mex-dec-04.htm>

good trip report, with excellent downloadable trip list well annotated.

Howell and Webb is the standard guide

<https://www.amazon.com/Guide-Mexico-Northern-Central-America/dp/0198540124>

This is a commendable piece of work but misses the point, being unusable in the field. It's big, heavy and does not illustrate all the species. Had to use the Costa Rica book below, it is half the size, and third the weight, as useful and still covers 80% of the numeric number of species. The Howell and Web book should be re written in this format.

<https://www.amazon.com/Field-Guide-Birds-Costa->

[Harry/dp/B01NAN4BDE/ref=sr_1_17?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1529177135&sr=1-17&keywords=field+guide+to+the+birds+of+costa+rica](https://www.amazon.com/Field-Guide-Birds-Costa-Harry/dp/B01NAN4BDE/ref=sr_1_17?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1529177135&sr=1-17&keywords=field+guide+to+the+birds+of+costa+rica)

Bird list with lifers in Bold. 39 lifers only ticked if 100% sure.

1. Booby species. There were some numbers of boobies constantly in view over the sea. I had neglected to take my telescope so I had to leave them. Occasionally came inshore but never

got a good view. One flew over my head while I was swimming that appeared to be a Masked booby.

2. Black bellied whistling duck – pair with well grown young on roadside pools, large numbers seen in other roadside wetlands from buses.
3. Great egret – Noted in wetland areas at least 6 in roadside pool.
4. Cattle egret – Common usually flying over in small flocks.
5. Snowy egret. – seen on roadside pool
6. Green heron - One seen along access road and one at roadside pool
7. Tricoloured heron – two seen near crocodile pool
8. Anhinga – Noted in wetland areas, 3 at crocodile pool
9. Neotropical cormorant – most noted off the beach in the old town of PV
10. **Roseate spoonbill** seen over track
11. White ibis 1 adult and three immature over track, and at least 3 at roadside pool
12. Wood stork – 1 seen and photographed in roadside pool
13. **White faced ibis** – deceptively named bird with plumage identical to glossy ibis except for red eye ring, 1 seen at the roadside pool.
14. Brown pelican – Common off the beach, and fairly tame.
15. Magnificent frigatebird – Common over the resort at all times
16. Peregrine falcon –single at airport while boarding the plane home
17. Grey hawk – pair seen down track one morning and possibly previously as an unidentified hawk species flew off a couple of days previously from almost the same perch.
18. **Laughing falcon** – pair seen down track and well photographed
19. Small falcon with buoyant flight seen near hotel one evening. From the literature this would seem to be American kestrel.
20. Black vulture- 5 times more common than Turkey vulture
21. Turkey vulture – noted not particularly common, heavily outnumbered by the above.
22. Osprey- predictably seen off the beach
23. Hudsonian whimbrel – seen along the beach and very approachable
24. **Willet** – seen on beach and first noted whilst explaining Brexit to a Canadian lady while in the sea.
25. Killdeer 3 seen near roadside pool and later 20+ seen by roadside pool.
26. **Black necked stilt** –pair on road side pool.
27. Spotted sandpiper 1 seen by alligator pool
28. **Royal tern** – a few seen off the beach. Now a lifer as West African subspecies has been split.
29. Northern jacana 3 at roadside pool, including 1 immature
30. American Coot 2 on roadside pool
31. **Rufous bellied chachalaca**, seen in silhouette the first morning, then up to 3 in the track area and well seen and photographed at Botanic gardens, feeding on the bird table.
32. **Common ground dove** – noted along the track and well photographed. Relieved to see and photograph this bird as it was a miss on the Costa Rica trip the previous year.
33. Inca dove – common along the track, 2 photographed near crocodile pool
34. Ruddy ground dove – noted along track but flighty and not photographed.
35. Mourning dove – seen along track, only later identified from photos
36. White winged dove 1 near crocodile pool
37. **Plain breasted ground dove** – what appears to be this species seen and photographed near the bird table at the Botanic gardens, seems to be out of its known range, although noted in this state in the literature, and in slightly the wrong habitat but well photographed and from this cannot be anything else.
38. Great kiskadee – Common and noisy. Could not find the very similar boat billed flycatcher again, as in Costa Rica.
39. Social flycatcher – common, even in downtown PV.

40. **Green jay** - some numbers well seen at Botanic garden bird table. Superbly marked bird and one of the highlights of the trip for me.
41. **San Blas jay** – seen at the botanical garden in numbers and also 3 along the track on second to last day.
42. Tropical kingbird – very common. Looked hard for the other species of kingbirds in the area, and photographed several to check, but could pick out only this species. I would, on a repeat visit, photograph all kingbirds, as there are several possibilities in the area.
43. *Myiarchus* flycatcher. 2 birds seen down the track. May have been Ashy throated, Dusky capped, Nuttings or Brown crested. This group is an identification nightmare.
44. **Greyish saltator** – few seen but well photographed, fairly tame and perched up for long periods.
45. **Yellow winged cacique** –common in all areas.
46. Squirrel cuckoo one seen along track one morning. This is an impressive and unmistakable bird. Even though I was on my own, I still yelled out “Squirrel cuckoo!” quickly glancing around to see if anyone was nearby and had overheard me. There was no one about, or they had already fled, fearing my insanity.
47. **Mexican parrotlet** – 50 + strong flock seen from road between hotel and crocodile pond.
48. **Military macaw** –pair seen over road from bus stop outside Botanic gardens and also heard from the restaurant.
49. Parrot species seen briefly and heard from the same bus stop. This from the literature would be likely be Orange fronted but heard only.
50. Ruby throated hummingbird - one seen several times along the track and well photographed, ID'ed from photos.
51. Cinnamon hummingbird - well seen at botanical gardens where one bird even tried to feed by pushing its bill between Beata's fingers.
52. Trogon sp heard calling one morning, call similar to that heard in Costa Rica the previous year, but distant and not seen.
53. Barn swallow - common in small numbers, roosting in the hotel quad, and along the track.
54. Grey breasted martin. Large numbers around resort and also in the old town of PV.
55. **Golden cheeked woodpecker** very common and well seen and photographed at both main locations.
56. **Lineated woodpecker** – 1 seen on access road and a pair down the track, participating in the photo of the century where a pair was working their way up a tree and one appeared adjacent to a laughing falcon for the perfect photo call. A huge bird.
57. **Pale billed woodpecker** – 1 at Botanic gardens and well photographed. Another huge woodpecker.
58. Swift species – distant views of several at Botanic gardens from literature Vaux probably most likely, but no way of telling.
59. **Blue grey gnatcatcher** – common along track, first songbird photographed and IDed on the first morning and first lifer.
60. **Vermillion flycatcher** seen first morning and subsequently, well photographed on 4 occasions and ID from photographs
61. Pacific-slope flycatcher or Cordilleran flycatcher . One bird was seen on the track and well photographed but not possible to ID from this as the two are so similar and can only be separated by call.
62. Small flycatcher with distinctive crest seen 1 morning, this may have been Northern Beardless Tyrannulet
63. Another flycatcher photographed along the track which seems to have been an Eastern Phoebe
64. **Painted bunting** –common along track, with extraordinarily marked male and female like a bright green greenfinch. The male is quite a sight when it suddenly pops up in front of you.

65. Very green warbler seen on the second morning, ID unknown
66. Second warbler photographed from underneath which may be Plumbeous vireo
67. Warbler with green body and turquoise head – Nashville or female MacGillvary's warbler, as had markings on face.
68. **MacGillvary's warbler** seen well one evening along second track
69. Yellow warbler - several seen.
70. Black and white warbler – one well seen down track on the final morning, found by Beata. First one since 1985, at How Hill in Norfolk!
71. American redstart – 1 female/ immature type seen at very close range along the access road, in a tree just above our head, fanning its tail. Distinctive bird.
72. **Yellowthroat** 1 male seen along track, almost certainly common yellowthroat on range and appearance, plus an immature bird photographed
73. **Cassin's vireo**. A bird seen in the scrub almost opposite the hotel identified as this species from photos.
74. Water thrush sp seen at Botanic gardens, from literature probably Louisiana Waterthrush.
75. **Scrub euphonia** –seen first morning and last, on both occasions a pair
76. **Grey collared becard** – seen twice along the track
77. 2 Wren species were seen on the track on two separate days, one with black and white markings on the face , therefore **Happy wren**, and one without which was probably Sinola Wren. Tickable views of the first but not really the last.
78. **Rufous backed thrush**. Seen several times along the track but could not be photographed, as somewhat flighty. Distinctive with a rufous body and grey head. An appropriately named bird.
79. **White throated thrush** well seen and photographed at Botanic garden feeding on the bird table.
80. Orange billed nightingale thrush heard only, not seen, but very surprised by this bird's song which was almost identical to European nightingale.
81. **Yellow breasted chat** seen two mornings along track and well photographed
82. House Finch. Heavily streaked bird seen and photographed along the track, identified from photographs.
83. **Lincoln's sparrow** – one bird seen well down the track and ID from photos.
84. White collared seedeater – seen along the track. This species has now been split and the bird in question is now called **Cinnamon-rumped Seedeater**
85. **Blue black grassquit** – small flock on grassland, North of the resort.
86. **Lesser goldfinch** – seen well and photographed along track
87. **Blue grosbeak** – seen daily along the track but took a couple of days to figure out what they were as there was no picture in the field guide, and they weren't in the Costa Rica book. This showed the weakness of the Howell guide. Presumably not included as they are common, but if you come from the UK, it's no help.
88. **Pyrrhuloxia** 1 immature seen and photographed along the track, identified from photographs. This was a mystery until I finally found a trip report from the area indicating that this species occurred there. Googling pictures found a match with mine confirming this was a juvenile.
89. House sparrow seen near hotel
90. **Orchard oriole** pair seen along track and well photographed.
91. Streak backed oriole – common along track and photographed.
92. **Hooded oriole** – probably overlooked but one bird identified from pictures taken in early morning light
93. Baltimore oriole – noted along the track
94. Northern mockingbird –noted in scrub adjacent to hotel
95. **Sinola crow** – two seen overflying track

96. Great tailed grackle – abundant in all areas in vast numbers roosting in the hotel quad where the acoustics made for an impressive sound. Also in PV where enormous numbers flew to roost while we were waiting for a bus at Walmart. Numerically I would say 98% of the total numbers of birds seen of all species on the trip were these.
97. Cowbird sp .Noted flying to roost with Grackles from bus stop at Walmart. This from the literature would be either bronzed or brown headed.
98. Groove billed ani –small flock seen in scrub North of Hotel complex

Thanks to Steve Schultz, Simon Thompson and Susan Campbell for identifying the unknowns