

## Trip Report

### West Mexico, 24 May – 5 June 2015

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West Mexico contains many legendary birding sites, but birding traffic has been lower in recent years due to media coverage of drug violence in Mexico. Some areas we visited, such as the Panuco and La Noria/Los Ebanos roads in Sinaloa, are in areas where the U.S. State Department continues to warn against travel. However, we did not encounter any problems at these or any other sites. It will always be a good idea, in Mexico as in any country, to ask locals about conditions in their area and adjust your plans accordingly. But on the whole, Mexico is a good travel destination these days, and some sites, such as the old Durango Highway, are better now for birding than they have ever been.

Not many people visit this part of Mexico at this time of year, but more people should. There was little tourist activity but tons of bird activity. The rainy season in this region hadn't started in earnest, especially up north (we only got rained on once, down south in Colima), but the breeding season was well underway, making it easy to find many sought-after specialties like Flammulated Flycatcher (which we found at 3 sites), Red-breasted Chat (at 4 sites), Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo (2 sites), Gray-collared Becard (3 sites), etcetera. It was hot at lower elevations, but not excessively so, and at higher elevations temperatures were perfect.

This trip was primarily focused around quality of birds, not quantity of birds, and on exploring some interesting territory. Most of the areas we visited are well described in Howell's *Birdfinding Guide to Mexico*, but we also reconnoitered some additional sites that are worth a visit. A couple of times we changed our itinerary on short notice due to weather, airline snafus, and missing some target birds. Ultimately the trip was a huge success. As a group we only missed a few target species, notably Aztec Thrush and Eared Quetzal (though individuals missed a few other birds).

#### **Itinerary:**

24 May: Andrew arrived in Guadalajara in the afternoon. A few hours birding on Lake Chapala, just east of the town of Chapala. Nathan arrived 11 PM. Night at the Brisas de Chapala Hotel, Chapala.

25 May: Lake Chapala in the morning. Drove to San Sebastian del Oeste. La Bufa in the evening, owling until late. Hotel in San Sebastian del Oeste.

26 May: La Bufa. Hotel in San Sebastian del Oeste.

27 May: La Bufa for a few hours in the morning. Drove to Guadalajara to pick up Carlos at the airport. Drove to Colima. La Cumbre/Road to Piscila in the evening. Hotel in Colima.

28 May: Rained out at dawn near El Jacal de San Antonio. Mid-morning, La Cumbre/Road to Piscila. Drove to Manzanillo. Manzanillo Airport marshes mid-afternoon. Playa de Oro road late afternoon/evening. Hotel in Manzanillo.

29 May: Morning at Barranca el Choncho. Drove to Volcan Fuego. After some afternoon birding there, turned around due to poor road conditions, drove to the National Park road up Volcan Nieve. Camped on Volcan Nieve.

30 May: Morning on upper slopes of Volcan Nieve, including owling before dawn. Laguna Zapotlan at midday. Drove back to Colima. Road to Paso del Zarco in evening, followed by owling on La Cumbre. Hotel in Colima.

31 May: Owling on La Cumbre before dawn. Road to Paso del Zarco in early morning. Drove to San Blas. Evening mangrove boat tour. Hotel in San Blas.

1 June: San Blas area / road to Chaculilla in morning. Drove to Mazatlan. Panuco Road in evening. Hotel in Mazatlan.

2 June: Los Ebanos road (off La Noria road) in morning. Old Durango Highway km 211 and Tufted Jay Preserve (Reserva Chara Pinta) in afternoon/evening. Night at the cabins in the Preserve.

3 June: Old Durango Highway km 211 at dawn. Reserva Chara Pinta morning mid-morning. Ejido Cienega de los Caballos in the evening. Hotel in El Salto.

4 June: Parque Natural Mexiquillo early morning. Parque Ecologico El Tecuan late morning. Parque Guadiana in city of Durango midday. Drove to Tepic. Night in cabins at Rancho La Noria on Cerro San Juan, owling until late.

5 June: pre-dawn owling at Rancho La Noria. Drove to Guadalajara airport.

#### **Notes on sites (listed in roughly chronological order):**

**Chapala, Jalisco.** Main targets here were Aztec Rail and Black-backed Oriole. The rails were not too hard to find (using playback) in the reedbeds along the lakeshore just east of town, accessible via various dirt tracks south of the paved road (the best spot was at N20.30293, W103.17434<sup>o</sup>). A male Black-backed Oriole was seen briefly by one of us on the lakeshore. It flew back up to the taller deciduous trees along the paved road, where we looked for it later without success. Streak-backed was the common oriole in and around Chapala. We tried playback for Spotted Rail without success (beware the somewhat similar vocalizations of Northern Jacana).

Other interesting birds we found here were Northern Bobwhite (*ssp graysoni*), numerous Fulvous Whistling-Ducks and Mexican Ducks, the "Mexican Bicolored" form of Red-winged Blackbird, "Chapala" Common Yellowthroat, "Lilian's" Eastern Meadowlark (*ssp auropectoralis*), and lots of breeding waterbirds. A single Yellow-headed Blackbird seemed out of season and a single Hepatic Tanager seemed out of habitat. A small flock of Monk Parakeets visited the lakeshore from an apparent base in the town of Chapala. A few Rusty-crowned Ground-Sparrows were heard in the denser brush away from the lakeshore and seen in somebody's backyard on the edge of town.

**San Sebastian del Oeste / Cerro La Bufa, Jalisco.** The pueblo of San Sebastian del Oeste is a wonderfully quaint and scenic little Mexican mountain town, only an hour from Puerto Vallarta but seemingly off the beaten track. If you are trying to convince non-birding family members to take a vacation in a terrific birding area, this place will please everybody. Birding was good even right in town, where we had Russet-crowned Motmot among other species.

The road up Cerro La Bufa is great for pine/oak specialties. It is not too heavily traveled, but we had to deal with the occasional truck or ATV. It gets rougher as it goes, but our mid-sized sedan was able to make it to within a few hundred yards of the top. We saw 73 species over the course of 2 days' birding, including 3 different encounters with Long-tailed Wood-Partridge. As others have noted, the species composition varies quite a bit from the bottom of the road to the top. The first stream crossing outside San Sebastian had some cool birds including Golden Vireo and Gray-crowned Woodpecker. A little farther up, there was a very big quarry-like pullout on the right, with a side road off to the left leading to a gate marked "Los Durazos" (private). At this site we had Gray-collared Becard on the first afternoon, though we didn't see it there later, and some low-elevation species like Rufous-bellied Chachalaca. Most of the higher-elevation birds, like Collared Towhee, Transvolcanic Jay, and Russet Nightingale-Thrush, were best seen within a kilometer or two of the turnoff to the tiny settlement of Real Alto. Some birds were present at all elevations, including Green-striped Brush-Finch, Blue Mockingbird, Arizona Woodpecker, Mountain Trogon, and Slate-throated Redstart.

We spent one night owling here, in the hopes of finding Cinereous Owl. We struck out on that species, but did find a pair of Spotted Owls (right at our turn around spot, a few km above the turnoff to Real Alto), a number of Mottled and Whiskered Screech-Owls, and many Mexican Whip-poor-wills.

**La Cumbre / Road to Piscila / Paso del Zarco, Colima.** The Microondas La Cumbre is well known and described in Howell. A few observations: the place is very popular with hikers, etcetera, and there can be a lot of highway noise. But it has good birds. There is a closed gate at the bottom next to a house, where the people told us the gate is open from about 6:00 AM (well before local sunrise, to accommodate hikers who want to beat the heat) to about 8:00 PM (when it is still not dark enough to look for owls, at least during the summer). The people were very amenable to accommodating us if we wanted to stay past 8:00. And in fact, on our last day we arrived at about 5:00 AM and found the gate closed, but not locked, so we were able to drive in at that hour. Even if the gate is locked, you can still park outside it and walk in. It's a long hike to the top, but we found both Balsas Screech-Owl and Colima Pygmy-Owl within about a quarter mile of the gate.

The Road to Piscila skirts around the edge of La Cumbre, and the first kilometer or so of the road allows 24-hour access to the same thornscrub habitat, at least on one side of the road. However, since the publication of Howell, this road has been paved, and we found truck traffic to be pretty heavy. Although Andrew had seen Banded Quail here in 2005, we did not have any luck with that species on this road despite multiple attempts. Black-chested Sparrow was easily seen here, though. There are surely some Banded Quail farther out on the road before and after the small town of Piscila, but the area is mostly cattle pastures. We did see some good birds out there such as Russet-crowned Motmot and Plain-capped Starthroat, but no quail.

After our earlier failures, using eBird reports as a guide, we tried looking for the quail along some side roads off of Highway 110 beyond La Cumbre. We found the road to Paso del Zarco to be very worthwhile. Across two visits, one in the evening and one the next morning, we found three different

coveys of Banded Quail along the road. Also here were thornscrub birds that can also be found at La Cumbre, like Nutting's Flycatcher and White-throated Magpie-Jay, plus birds more common in open country such as Rufous-naped Wren and Stripe-headed Sparrow. Where arroyos cross the road, stringers of denser forest had birds like Pale-billed Woodpecker, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, and Rose-throated Becard.

Since this location is not described anywhere, we'll include some directions to this site. The road connects route 110 in the north (just over 18km to the east of the road to La Cumbre) to route 243 in the south, around Los Tepames. The northern end of the road is at N19.17317, W 103.55969°.

**Manzanillo Airport Marshes, Colima.** These are well described in Howell. However, one experience of ours bears mention. We wanted to explore the last dirt track that heads south before the airport. About half a kilometer long, it borders some ponds and heads straight to a small house. When we were there, about half a dozen people were fishing and hanging out along this track near the paved road. We asked a couple of them for permission to enter, and they said it was OK. But apparently we didn't ask the right person, because as soon as we entered we were accosted and scolded by an older man who apparently owns the house and the land. He didn't have a problem with us birding there, but he was pretty offended that we didn't ask permission (of him) first. So if you want to bird down this track, make sure to track down the owner of the house first. We failed to find rails at this spot despite playback. Ruddy-breasted Seedeater was present along with White-collareds.

**Playa de Oro Road, Colima.** Well described in Howell. Very cool spot with excellent and extensive tropical forest. White-bellied Wren was the most common species here, which is a little odd since we did not see them at any other site. Flammulated Flycatcher (at N19.14760, W104.50926°) was a highlight, along with Red-breasted Chat, Citreoline Trogon, and multiple Golden-crowned Emeralds.

**Barranca el Choncho, Jalisco.** Well described in Howell. Terrific gallery forest at this location – not so much thornscrub, though. We arrived before dawn, and had a singing Northern Potoo, as well as several Mottled Owls. San Blas Jay was common here (we didn't see it at any other site, except for a brief one-person glimpse at the Manzanillo Airport Marshes). This is also the only place where we saw Fan-tailed Warbler and the West Mexican subspecies of the Red-crowned Ant-Tanager. Lilac-crowned Parrot, Flammulated Flycatcher, and Red-breasted Chat were here as well.

**Volcan Fuego, Jalisco.** Well described in Howell, but even following his directions carefully, it took us a while to find the right road off the highway here, and then we accidentally went left instead of right at km 9. (We misread a sign at the turnoff to say that the right-hand turn was onto posted private property.) Eventually we figured out our mistake and took the right fork, but we still couldn't reach the end of the road in our car. We got to within 5 km or so of the point where Howell says the road is blocked, but that was still short of the high pine-dominated forests we were hoping for, so we eventually turned back around and went to Volcan Nieve instead. This road has deteriorated significantly since Andrew's visit in 2006, and it appears that it is not being maintained past the turnoff to the antennas mentioned in Howell. This may not be a viable site to bird the upper pine forests, even with a 4x4, for much longer.

**National Park road up Volcan Nieve, Jalisco.** This road is newly constructed since Howell wrote his book. It is closer to Ciudad Guzman than either of the other two roads up Volcan Nieve (Floripondio or R.M.O. Viboras), and I believe it goes up to higher elevation. It's in great condition and accesses excellent habitat. We found many specialty species up high, including Long-tailed Wood-Partridge, Gray-

barred Wren, Red Warbler, Golden-browed Warbler, Green-striped Brush-Finch, Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo, Collared Towhee, Transvolcanic Jay, and Bumblebee Hummingbird. We were able to camp along the upper portion of the road in a really nice spot. At the upper parts of the road we covered (in dense spruce forest), Golden-crowned Kinglet was very common.

From Ciudad Guzman, from the junction of route 417 (the libre from Colima) and route 429, take route 429 towards Autlan for 13.7km. The turnoff to the south is signed to Volcan Nieve, and is at N19.62887, W103.53766°. The good habitat starts in 8 or so kilometers from here, and continues for quite a ways higher (we turned around at about km 17 from the highway).

**Laguna Zapotlan, Jalisco.** This lake is on the edge of two highways and wouldn't qualify as a prime birding destination at this time of year. We didn't find any rails here, although "Chapala" Common Yellowthroats were abundant. The best site for birding the reedbeds is a lakeside road on the east edge (N19.763851, W103.469508°), accessed from Highway 417.

**Panuco Road, Sinaloa.** Well described in Howell. Really excellent birding here during one evening, including Elegant Quail, Russet-crowned Motmot, Colima Pygmy-Owl, Mexican Parrotlet, Lesser Roadrunner, Yellow Grosbeak, and Bat Falcon. No indications that the area was unsafe.

**Los Ebanos Road, Sinaloa.** This side road off the La Noria Road (signed to "Los Ebanos, Veranos and Pichilingue") is mentioned in Howell. The habitat along this road is in good condition and very birdy. In our morning it produced Lilac-crowned Parrot, Nutting's and Flammulated Flycatchers, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, "Godman's" Scrub Euphonia, Red-breasted Chat, and a single cooperative Purplish-backed Jay. As an unpaved side road it carries much less traffic than the highway to La Noria, and the thornscrub habitat is more extensive and higher in quality. No indications that the area was unsafe. We also saw some Purplish-backed Jays while driving along the main La Noria Road, within a couple of kilometers of its start.

**Km 211, Old Durango Highway, Sinaloa.** This remains a reliable site for Sinaloa Martin. Birding right along the highway here used to be a miserable experience given the bumper-to-bumper truck traffic, but since the opening of the new cuota highway from Durango to Mazatlan, the amount of traffic on the old Durango Highway has fallen almost to zero, making this spot MUCH more pleasant. We thought we could climb the slope to get closer to the martins, but this turned out to be foolhardy. Even the parts of the hill that aren't too steep are extremely loose and unstable, and what looks like solid rock can come crashing down as soon as you touch it. In addition to the martins, we had heard-only Gray-collared Becard and Military Macaw here.

**Tufted Jay Preserve / Reserva Chara Pinta.** The site described by Howell as "Barranca Rancho Liebre" has now been transformed into an ecotourist attraction. The cabins are open and the people running them are helpful and friendly, but I don't think they've gotten nearly as many visits as they were hoping for, due to the drop-off in tourism in this region the last few years. It's a shame, because this location is probably safer than it's ever been due to the engagement of the community in the Reserva, and better than ever for birding thanks to the new trails and cabins. The opening of the new cuota highway has drastically cut traffic through the nearby town of El Palmito, with good and bad effects – the town seems cleaner and more cheerful now, with children playing in the road, and it's nice to be able to bird without the constant sound of engine braking – but the local economy seems a little depressed. They could use more visitors at the Preserve.

When reserving the cabins we had the choice of paying for someone to cook for us, or getting our food in town. If we had it to do over again, I think we'd choose to have them cook for us. The food options in El Palmito are extremely limited – just a couple of very small mini-supers and two roadside stands selling only gorditas, one of which is open 24 hours. There are gas stoves in the cabins, but there were no matches, practically no cooking utensils, no plates, no dish soap, and no refrigerator, so it was difficult even to cook for ourselves. The cabins do have full bathrooms, running water (including hot water for the shower), and electric lights, but no outlets for charging electronics. There is some cell phone service up there.

Birding at the reserve was very good. In our 24-hour stay we had a couple different encounters with Tufted Jays (our first one actually being at km 216 along the highway before we ever reached the Preserve, where we also had Gray-collared Becard; our last one right at the cabin where we were staying). We also had a good assortment of pine-oak birds including Gray-crowned Woodpecker, Green-striped Brush-Finch, Red and Red-faced Warblers, Slate-throated and Painted Redstarts, and more. Military Macaws cruised up and down the Barranca a few times and were visible from the trails overlooking the gorge.

**Parque Natural Mexiquillo.** About an hour east of the Tufted Jay Preserve along the old highway in the state of Durango, this park doesn't get much attention from birders, but is well worth a visit. The drier pine forests here support a different avifauna than in the Tufted Jay Preserve, including many birds more typical of Arizona than of Sinaloa, such as Red Crossbill, Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Western Bluebird, Plumbeous Vireo, Violet-green Swallow, and even American Robin. But we also saw classic Mexican specialties such as Pine Flycatcher, Red Warbler, Elegant Euphonia, Gray Silky-Flycatcher, and Rufous-capped Brush-Finch. Black and Chestnut-collared Swifts nest at the waterfall, along with American Dipper. Eared Quetzal has been reported here, and even though we didn't find one, the habitat is extensive, and I bet there's a pair somewhere in the park every year. The park has cabins where it may be possible to stay, but we opted to stay in a hotel in El Salto, about half an hour down the road.

**Ejido Cienega de los Caballos.** We visited this little-known spot because of recent reports of Eared Quetzal. The members of this ejido are reportedly trying to attract ecotourists to stay in some new cabins here. We'd been told to ask permission to enter the property when we got there, but we had some trouble finding the right person to ask. The place where you turn right off the paved road to get to the cabins is at (N23.776934, W104.994248°). Everything on the right (south/west) side of the road here is Ejido Cienega de los Caballos, but everything on the left side of the road is a different ejido, and if you ask somebody on that side of the road about the cabins, you may get blank stares. The person in charge of the cabins lives in a little house at (N23.774192, W104.995989°), on the right side of the road past the bend. If he's not home, you can ask around for him (making sure to ask the inhabitants of the correct ejido).

Once you get permission to go inside, you can follow a slightly rough road in through open pine forest (lots of Striped Sparrows) past a couple small reservoirs on the left and then up a hill into denser pine forest. We didn't see the Eared Quetzal family that had been here two weeks before, but we did see a White-naped Swift fly over, and in an hour of walking the trails we had no fewer than four separate encounters with Montezuma Quail. Overall the forest struck us as sparser and drier than we expected, but if Eared Quetzal bred here this year, maybe it'll breed here in the future too.

**Parque Ecologico El Tecuan.** Lured by a very recent eBird report of White-throated Flycatcher by Durango birder Bryan Sharp, we visited this spot between El Salto and Durango. We got to the gate (on the south side of the libre highway) just after a busload of schoolchildren all apparently arriving for an overnight camping trip. However, we and the schoolchildren were the only visitors to the park, which doesn't really have much in the way of facilities for visitors. The guard initially didn't want to let us in – he said something about how we technically needed to get a permit from somewhere in the city of Durango – but he soon relented. Later, Bryan told me that the park is only open Thursday through Sunday, which he thought might be the cause of our initial difficulties, but we were visiting on a Thursday, so I'm not sure if that was the problem. At any rate, the guard didn't seem too concerned about the lack of a permit, but be aware of this issue if you're planning a visit.

Bryan had reported two pairs of White-throated Flycatchers, one each at the second and third ponds (lagunas). The park is pretty large and finding the lagunas requires a little knowledge of where you are going. If you enter where we did, you'll soon see a large fenced enclosure for elk along the right side of the road. When the road bends left, the fence bends left too for a while, but then at a certain point the fence leaves the road and heads uphill, and a fairly rough track follows it. This is where the guard told us to park and walk up the track to the top of the hill. From the top of the hill you can see one of the lagunas off to the south in the distance. We guessed this was the first laguna, because there was no vegetation around it of the sort we figured White-throated Flycatchers would like. So we set off bearing well to the left of it, figuring that the second and third ponds were probably uphill from the first one. We never made it all the way to the drainage, because we found our target bird well before we got there, in a dry meadow surrounded by sparse pine savannah (at N23.90344, W105.02660°). Not the kind of habitat we expected for White-throated Flycatcher! More expected were the many Striped Sparrows as well as typical "Arizona birds" such as Buff-breasted Flycatcher, House Wren, Western Bluebird, and Chipping Sparrow.

**Parque Guadiana.** This urban park in downtown Durango has many mature trees and lots of water (and lots of people). We went there looking for Black-backed Orioles, but only found a male that was obviously a hybrid Bullock's/Black-backed, and a female that looked typical of Bullock's. There are also hundreds of herons and egrets nesting in the trees all over the park, mostly Cattle Egrets, but with some Snowy Egrets, Great Egrets, and Black-crowned Night-Herons mixed in. We saw a female Lucifer Hummingbird just outside the park gate.

**Rancho La Noria (on Cerro San Juan).** We stayed at the cabins here. We arrived at dusk and had to leave shortly after dawn the next day, but that was OK since our main goal was to look for Cinereous Owl (*Strix sartorii*, sometimes called "Mexican Barred Owl"). And we found it, procuring the first photographs and audio recordings of the taxon (story here: <http://earbirding.com/blog/archives/4905>). The precise spot where we found the owl was 1.06 km up the trail from the cabins, according to GPS (at N21.48105, W104.98640°). We also had several Mottled Owls, and just before leaving found Elegant Quail and Spotted Wren right around the cabins. This area is supposed to be overrun by people from Tepic on the weekends, but during our mid-week visit it was very quiet and pleasant.