

Southern Mexico

The Highlands and Lowlands of Chiapas

May 9-17, 2009

LEADER: HECTOR GOMEZ DE SILVA

COMPILED BY: HECTOR GOMEZ DE SILVA

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

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The southernmost Mexican state, Chiapas, is among the most appealing of all the states of this super-diverse, country with its varied landscapes, archaeological sites, and bounty of natural wonders including bird species rarely seen outside of Chiapas. That is why this tour attracts both casual birders and those searching for hard-to-find restricted-range species. We trace a circular route starting and ending in the city of Tapachula in the Pacific lowlands, and taking in the prehispanic pyramid of Chinkultic and breathtaking scenery at Sima de las Cotorras (a large limestone sinkhole), Sumidero Canyon, and Lagos de Montebello. All of these ingredients make this, as a rule, an outstanding tour.

Our 2009 tour was no exception, with a small group of amiable birders with different levels of interest and experience participating. In the very first afternoon of the tour we birded the coast south of Tapachula and several spots on the way, seeing several species we were not to see again elsewhere on the tour, not the least being Turquoise-browed Motmot, Ruddy-breasted Seedeater, and Rufous-naped Wren.

The following day started with breakfast and an hour of after-breakfast birding in the grounds of our Tapachula hotel, where White-bellied Chachalacas, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls, Orange-chinned Parakeets, and Spot-breasted Oriole were some of the highlights. Then we drove to Finca Argovia looking for Blue-tailed Hummingbird (one lucky participant and I glimpsed it) and Violet Sabrewing. Most of the afternoon was spent driving to our next destination, Arriaga. Arriaga is the base for searching after the very local Rose-bellied Bunting, and this was our main pre-breakfast bird, although by no means the only one (here we saw our only Green-fronted Hummingbird, Citreoline Trogon, Orange-breasted Bunting, and West Mexican Chachalaca too). The scenic route from Arriaga to Ocozocuautila produced a surprise in the form of two unexpected Solitary Eagles, as well as White-tailed Hawk, Azure-crowned Hummingbird, Rusty Sparrow, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Lesser Roadrunner, and more. From Ocozocuautila we headed to the impressive limestone sinkhole where dozens of Green Parakeets roost, before back-tracking to Ocozocuautila again and then heading to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of Chiapas and our base for the next few days.

Based out of Tuxtla we first visited the magnificent Sumidero Canyon. We usually have to visit twice to see its specialty birds, but this year one morning was enough to get them all, with Blue-and-white Mockingbirds prancing across the road and the very rare Pheasant Cuckoo included! We continued toward San Cristóbal de las Casas, making a birding stop where the trail was extremely muddy from recent rain, but we were fortunate to find Rufous-collared Robin, Blue-throated Motmot, and others. At Laguna Bélgica we tried hard to get a Black-faced (Mexican) Antthrush to show itself, and finally half the group did get to see it. An army ant swarm attracting many birds, including Squirrel Cuckoo and Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, was another memorable moment at Laguna Bélgica.

The other site visited out of Tuxtla Gutiérrez was the Nava's Wren locality; on our first morning, many birds gave only frustrating glimpses, unfortunately, but the star Nava's Wren gave everyone a good show in its rough limestone home. On the second morning, a nearby area produced many birds not seen elsewhere on the tour, including rare good views of Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner and a cryptic Green-backed Sparrow.

The morning out of San Cristóbal de las Casas produced Pink-headed Warblers, Pine Flycatchers, and a beautiful male Amethyst-throated Hummingbird in the pine forest, after a pair of Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercers and both White-eared and Magnificent hummingbirds at our hotel. At the Chinkultic archaeological site a male Slender Sheartail appeared, its wings buzzing with the same sounds as a bumblebee's.

Our final morning of birding was in Lagunas de Montebello National Park, where we were lucky with sightings of Ruddy Foliage-gleaner, Highland Guan, both Strong-billed and Spot-crowned woodcreepers, and three species of jays (Azure-hooded, Black-throated, and Unicolored), all in the same 800-meter stretch of road through a patch of cloud forest. After the birding we walked up the steps to the lookout over the most spectacular of Montebello's lakes, before heading to our pleasant lunch spot, Parador Santa María. Several stops on our drive to Tapachula permitted us to pick up a few extra birds of the cloud forest such as Black Robin and Black-capped Swallow.

This was a very successful tour at the best time of year to find Chiapas's most interesting breeding species without getting rained on every day. So, do come to Chiapas to see rare and beautiful birds and awesome scenery.

ITINERARY:

- May 9:** Arrival in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico; afternoon birding near the coast south of Tapachula. NIGHT: Hotel Loma Real.
- May 10:** Morning birding the grounds of Hotel Loma Real and Finca Argovia; afternoon driving to Arriaga with a couple of birding stops on the way. NIGHT: Hotel Ik Lumaal, Arriaga.
- May 11:** Morning near Arriaga and on the road between Arriaga and Ocozocuautila; afternoon driving to and visiting the limestone sinkhole known as Sima de las Cotorras. NIGHT: Hotel Maya Sol, Tuxtla Gutiérrez.
- May 12:** Morning at: Sumidero Canyon National Park (upper and lower lookouts); afternoon at Laguna Bélgica State Park. NIGHT: Hotel Maya Sol, Tuxtla Gutiérrez.
- May 13:** Morning at Nava's Wren site; afternoon birding on road toward San Cristóbal de las Casas. NIGHT: Hotel Maya Sol, Tuxtla Gutiérrez.
- May 14:** Morning at rainforest near Nava's Wren site; afternoon birding near San Cristóbal de las Casas, thwarted by rain. NIGHT: Parador San Juan de Dios, San Cristóbal de las Casas.
- May 15:** Morning at Pink-headed Warbler site near San Cristóbal; afternoon birding at Chinkultic archaeological site. NIGHT: Hotel Hacienda de los Ángeles, Comitán.
- May 16:** Morning at Lagos de Montebello, mid-morning Lunch at Hotel Parador Santa María; afternoon drive back to Tapachula with a few birding stops on the way. NIGHT: Hotel Loma Real.
- May 17:** Departure Home.

LOCATION KEY:

Sum= Sumidero Canyon.

B = Laguna Bélgica. Humid tropical forest

N = Nava's Wren site. Humid tropical forest.

S = vicinity of San Cristóbal de las Casas. Pine-oak forest.

M = Lagos de Montebello and nearby Chinkultic

A = foothills above Arriaga. Tropical dry forest.

T= Tapachula and vicinity.

W = Widespread at all elevations.

Bird names in **bold** are endemic to Mexico—in some cases with portions of their ranges extending into northern Central America, or extreme SW USA.

BIRDS OBSERVED:

TINAMOUS

Thicket Tinamou – heard at Sum.

Slaty-breasted Tinamou – heard N, B.

SWANS, GEESE & DUCKS

Black-bellied Whistling-Dick – agricultural areas in Ocozocuatla and flying over Chinkultic archaeological site

GUANS, CHACHALACAS & ALLIES

Plain Chachalaca – heard at Sum, seen Chinkultic and M.

West Mexican Chachalaca. One glimpsed at A.

White-bellied Chachalaca. T

Highland Guan. One at M.

NEW WORLD QUAILS

Northern Bobwhite –on the road to Sima de las Coterras

Singing Quail –heard at Sum.

CORMORANTS

Neotropical Cormorant – beach at T.

BITTERN & HERONS

Great Egret – Small numbers in scattered locations, mostly T.

Snowy Egret – Small numbers in scattered locations, mostly T.

Tricolored Heron – One flying over the fish farm south of T

Cattle Egret – scattered locations.

Green Heron –1 at M.

IBISES AND SPOONBILLS

White Ibis- a small flock flying over fish farm at T.

Roseate Spoonbill –one at fish farm at T.

AMERICAN VULTURES

Black Vulture – every day

Turkey Vulture – every day

EAGLES, HAWKS & ALLIES

Swallow-tailed Kite –One at M

White-tailed Kite –near Comitán

White-breasted (Sharp-shinned) Hawk—1 glimpsed at M.

Solitary Eagle –two glimpsed in pine woods above A.

Common Black-Hawk –one soaring over agricultural area between A and Tuxtla Gutiérrez

Roadside Hawk –one near T.

White-tailed Hawk – an adult soaring over agricultural area between A and Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

FALCONS

Crested Caracara –T and agricultural area between A and Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

American Kestrel – near Chinkultic

Bat Falcon –a threesome at Finca Argovia and a pair at Sima de las Cotorras.

AVOCETS & STILTS

Black-necked Stilt –one at fish farm near T.

JACANAS

Northern Jacana –5 at fish farm near T.

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Sanderling –one juvenile at beach near T.

GULLS & TERNS

Franklin's Gull –a large V-shaped flock of around 200 birds on beach at T.

Royal Tern –a few seen by one participant at beach near T.

Least Tern --one at fish farm near T.

PIGEONS & DOVES

Rock Pigeon – Widespread; common in and around towns

Red-billed Pigeon – mostly near T.

Band-tailed Pigeon –4 at M.

White-winged Dove – Widespread in open areas

Mourning Dove –one near Comitán.

Common Ground-Dove – one near Chinkultic.

Plain-breasted Ground-Dove –seen by one participant at T.

Ruddy Ground-Dove –one at Ocozocuatla.

Inca Dove – Widespread and numerous.

White-tipped Dove –Sum, near T.

PARROTS, MACAWS ETC.

Orange-fronted Parakeet –at our hotel in T, a small flock at A.

Green Parakeet –Sima de las Cotorras

Orange-chinned Parakeet -- at our hotel in T.

White-fronted Parrot –mostly T and Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

CUCKOOS & ALLIES

Squirrel Cuckoo –between A and Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Sum.

Striped Cuckoo – heard at Sum

Pheasant Cuckoo –one seen, responded to playback at Sum

Lesser Roadrunner –one well seen near Ocozocuatla.

Groove-billed Ani –widespread.

OWLS

Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl –at our hotel in T.

SWIFTS

Chestnut-collared Swift –one at our last stop on the drive to T on our last day of birding.

White-collared Swift – several areas.

Vaux's Swift – Sum.

White-throated Swift—Chinkultic.

HUMMINGBIRDS

Long-billed Hermit –glimpsed at N.

Long-tailed Sabrewing –N. A narrow-range endemic.

Violet Sabrewing –at least 2 at Finca Argovia.

Canivet's Emerald –a few at Sum

White-eared Hummingbird – mostly at our hotel in S.

White-bellied Emerald –N

Azure-crowned Hummingbird –mostly between A and Tuxtla, and Chinkultic.

Blue-tailed Hummingbird –seen by one participant at Finca Argovia.

Rufous-tailed Hummingbird – one at N.

Cinamon Hummingbird –T.

Green-fronted Hummingbird –glimpsed at A.

Amethyst-throated Hummingbird- --one male with glittering gorget at S

Magnificent Hummingbird – at our hotel at S.

Plain-capped Starthroat – one on road to Sima de las Cotorras.

Slender Sheartail a male at Chinkultic and a female while having lunch at Parador Santa María.

TROGONS

Citreoline Trogon –responded to tape at A.

Violaceous Trogon –heard in a few places, seen at Sum

Collared Trogon –a male at N

Mountain Trogon –A few heard at S.

MOTMOTS

Blue-throated Motmot –one at S

Russet-crowned Motmot –Sum

Blue-crowned Motmot –Sum and at antswarm at B

Turquoise-browed Motmot –one near T.

KINGFISHERS

Ringed Kingfisher –near T

TOUCANS

Emerald Toucanet –1 at Sum.

WOODPECKERS & ALLIES

Acorn Woodpecker –3 between A and Tuxtla.

Golden-fronted Woodpecker –seen on most days (except at S).

Hairy Woodpecker –1 at M.

Golden-olive Woodpecker –distant but well seen near B

Northern Flicker –heard at S, seen in our last afternoon of birding

OVENBIRDS

Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner –N.
Ruddy Foliage-gleaner –one well seen at M.
Olivaceous Woodcreeper—heard at B.
Strong-billed Woodcreeper –one at M.
Ivory-billed Woodcreeper –between A and Tuxtla, Sum.
Spotted Woodcreeper –one heard N.
Spot-crowned Woodcreeper –one at M.

ANTHRUSHES

Black-faced (Mexican) Antthrush –one seen by half the group at B.

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Northern Beardless Tyrannulet –one between A and Tuxtla.
Stub-tailed Spadebill –N
Common Tody-Flycatcher –one heard at our last birding stop of the trip.
Belted Flycatcher –one at Sum.
Greater Pewee – 1 or 2 at S.
Western Wood-Pewee –one heard near S.
Eastern Wood-Pewee –mostly N.
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher – one at Sum, one very dull individual at N.
Least Flycatcher – 1 at Sum.
Alder Flycatcher –one at S.
Pine Flycatcher –1 at S.
Yellowish Flycatcher –heard at S and M.
Buff-breasted Flycatcher –heard and glimpsed by the tour-leader on our last day of birding.
Vermilion Flycatcher – most near Ocozocauatla en route to Sima de las Cotorras.
Bright-rumped Attila –N.
Dusky-capped Flycatcher – Finca Argovia, N, heard at Sum.
Nutting's Flycatcher –Sum.
Flammulated Flycatcher –one at Sum.
Great Kiskadee – several in the first 4 days of tour.
Boat-billed Flycatcher –T, Sum, near Comitán.
Social Flycatcher –Widespread.
Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher –ones and twos in most places except S.
Piratic Flycatcher –near Sima de las Cotorras.
Tropical Kingbird – widespread in first half of tour.
Couch's Kingbird –between A and Tuxtla, heard Sum.

GENERA INCERTAE SEDIS

Gray-collared Becard –a fine male at Sum.
Rose-throated Becard –at out hotel in T.
Masked Tityra –several places near Tuxtla.

VIREOS and ALLIES

Hutton's Vireo – S
Brown-capped Vireo –3 heard singing at M.
Yellow-green Vireo – Finca Argovia, A, Sum.
Tawny-crowned Greenlet –one glimpsed at N.
Lesser Greenlet- B, N.
Rufous-browed Peppershrike –between A and Tuxtla, heard Sum

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS

Steller's Jay – S
White-throated Magpie-Jay – Sum, T
Green Jay – Sum
Brown Jay – B, N.
Unicolored Jay – M.
Azure-hooded Jay – M.
Black-throated Jay – M.

SWALLOWS

Gray-breasted Martin --mostly near T
Mangrove Swallow –beach near T.
Black-capped Swallow –between M and T
Northern Rough-winged Swallow – Sum
Cave Swallow –S.
Barn Swallow – scattered locations.

LONG-TAILED TITS

Bushtit – S; the "Black-eared" (*personatus*) subspecies

WRENS

Band-backed Wren –N and M.
Giant Wren –T.
Rufous-naped Wren –T.
Nava's Wren –Responded to tape at N by approaching, though silently. Few people have been able to see this very restricted-range species!
Spot-breasted Wren –heard at a couple of places, one glimpsed at N.
Rufous-and-white Wren --heard at Finca Argovia.
Banded Wren –Finca Argovia, A, heard at Sum.
Plain Wren –heard several places including at Sum and Chinkultic
House Wren – ones and twos at Finca Argovia, Chinkultic and M.
White-bellied Wren –heard at N.
White-breasted Wood-Wren –heard B and N.

OLD WORLD WARBLERS

Long-billed Gnatwren –N
Tropical Gnatcatcher – one glimpsed at N.
White-lored Gnatcatcher –one glimpsed at Sum.

THRUSHES & ALLIES

Eastern Bluebird –S.
Brown-backed Solitaire – heard S.
Slate-colored Solitaire –heard at N and M. Beautiful Wood Thrush-like song.
Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush –heard at a few places, one seen by some between M and T.
Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush –S
Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush –M
Swainson's Thrush –B.
Black Robin –seen between M and T.
Clay-colored Robin –Widespread.
White-throated Thrush –N.
Rufous-collared Robin – S.

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Tropical Mockingbird –near Ocozocuatla.

Blue-and-white Mockingbird – Sum, S.

SILKY-FLYCATCHERS

Gray Silky-Flycatcher – S, between M and T..

OLIVE WARBLER

Olive Warbler – S

WOOD WARBLERS

Crescent-chested Warbler – S.

Tropical Parula –heard at N

Magnolia Warbler –1 at Sum.

Black-throated Green Warbler –Sum, S.

Blackburnian Warbler – one at Sum

Grace’s Warbler –one seen by one participant at S

Mourning Warbler –singles at Sum, N.

Gray-crowned Yellowthroat –between T and A.

Wilson’s Warbler – very few at N, S

Pink-headed Warbler – S.

Slate-throated Redstart – S, M.

Fan-tailed Warbler -- Sum

Golden-crowned Warbler—B, N.

Rufous-capped Warbler –1 glimpsed at B, another at N, seen well at Chinkultic.

Red-breasted Chat –Sum, one male that responded to playback.

TANAGERS

Common Bush-Tanager –S, M.

Red-crowned Ant-Tanager –one female glimpsed by the leader at N.

Red-throated Ant-Tanager –N.

Hepatic Tanager – S.

Flame-colored Tanager –M.

White-winged Tanager –a pair well seen between M and T.

Crimson-collared Tanager —1 at N.

Blue-gray Tanager –T.

Yellow-winged Tanager –seen on most days.

Red-legged Honeycreeper –scattered locations, mostly N.

BUNTINGS, SPARROWS & ALLIES

Blue-black Grassquit –T.

Yellow-faced Grassquit –N

White-collared Seedeater –T, N..

Ruddy-breasted Seedeater –several, some in breeding plumage, near beach at T.

Cinamon-bellied Flower-piercer –a pair at our hotel at S, one glimpsed between M and T.

Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch –1 at S.

White-naped (Yellow-throated) Brush-Finch – one glimpsed by a couple of participants between M and T.

Orange-billed Sparrow –heard at N.

Olive Sparrow –Sum

Green-backed Sparrow –one at N.

Prevost’s Ground-Sparrow –heard Chinkultic.

Stripe-headed Sparrow –near beach at T, between A and Tuxtla.

Rusty Sparrow – between A and Tuxtla.

Rufous-collared Sparrow –S, near M
Yellow-eyed Junco --S

CARDINALS, GROSBEAKS & BUNTINGS

Grayish Saltator –at our T hotel.
Black-headed Saltator –N.
Black-faced Grosbeak – N.
Yellow Grosbeak –Sum.
Blue Bunting—a few pairs at Sum
Blue Grosbeak –near Ocozocuaula.
Varied Bunting –Sum.
Orange-breasted Bunting –glimpsed at A.
Rose-bellied Bunting –A.

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird –S.
Eastern meadowlark –grassy fields on road to Sima de las Cotorras.
Melodious Blackbird –practically every day.
Great-tailed Grackle – Widespread in towns
Red-eyed Cowbird –one or a few every day.
Bar-winged Oriole –Sum.
Orchard Oriole –2 females at our T hotel.
Yellow-backed Oriole—heard at S and M.
Streak-backed Oriole –between A and Tuxtla, Sum.
Spot-breasted Oriole –at our T hotel.
Altamira Oriole –T, between T and A.
Yellow-billed Cacique –heard at N.
Yellow-winged Cacique –T.
Montezuma Oropendola –near N.

FINCHES

Scrub Euphonia –between T and A, between A and Tuxtla.
Yellow-throated Euphonia –Sum, N.
Olive-backed Euphonia –a pair glimpsed at N.
House Finch –S.
Lesser Goldfinch – Ocozocuaula, Parador Santa María near M..

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow – towns.

Also:

basilisk –T.
cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus* sp.) –near Sima de las Cotorras.
squirrel (*Sciurus aureogaster*) –scattered locations