

CHRISTMAS IN OAXACA

DECEMBER 20-29, 2007

LEADER: HÉCTOR GÓMEZ DE SILVA

**COMPILED BY:
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The city of Oaxaca is like a hub for birders in this birdiest state of Mexico. Different ecosystems are found in the north, east, west, and south; as a consequence, hundreds of bird species, many of them endemic to Mexico (or even to the state of Oaxaca), are readily encountered in short to moderate length day-trips from the city. The city is also one of the most culturally interesting parts of Mexico, and Christmas is one of the most culturally interesting times to visit. All of these ingredients make this, as a rule, an outstanding tour.

Our 2007 Christmas in Oaxaca tour was no exception, with a small group of amiable birders with different levels of interest and experience participating. One of the most gratifying memories, for me, was seeing the participant least interested in birds delight at the encounter of a male Bumblebee Hummingbird singing away on his display perch up in the mountains of the Sierra Madre del Sur. In fact, the Bumblebee Hummingbird won the most votes for the favorite moment of our tour, but there were many other great moments. We even saw a male Blue-capped Hummingbird, endemic to a small portion of the state of Oaxaca; ours was the first Christmas in Oaxaca tour to encounter this species.

But let's get chronological. During the first full day of our trip, we took in the spectacular ruins of Monte Albán and its treasures in the Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca. We also bumped into many special birds, including the rare endemic Pileated Flycatcher, our only one of the tour, and a pair of Lazuli Buntings (very rare in Oaxaca). The following day started with a delightful bit of birding in a montane apple orchard at the village of Arroyo Guacamaya, and ended with a demonstration and sale of alebrijes—fanciful carved animals. On Christmas Bird Count day we went to the montane forest of La Cumbre where, despite the misty and very windy conditions, we saw lots of warblers and the main species that birders go to La Cumbre for—Dwarf Jay. That afternoon we saw more birds in the still windy San Andrés Huajuapam reservoir, returning to Mexico City to see the unique radish contest held every 23rd of December.

Conditions were not windy on the following days, and on the day after the Bird Count we visited several habitats near Teotitlán del Valle, including the special arroyo where birds come down to bathe at midday, and the weaving demonstration (and shopping) at Teotitlán. After that we visited the birds and ruins of Yagul and the mezcal factory. After having seen most of the birds of the Valley of Oaxaca, the next day we decided to negotiate the long drive to La Soledad on the Sierra Madre del Sur on a mission to see two special hummingbird species: the cute Bumblebee and the very rare Blue-capped (Oaxaca endemic). That afternoon was devoted to sightseeing in two beautiful churches and the town of the black pottery. On our second-to-last day we also went farther afield, leaving the Oaxaca Valley on the road towards Tehuantepec, adding more new species. And lastly, we had an easy day of birding in the lower slopes of the ranges north of Oaxaca City in the morning, with a free afternoon during which some people returned to the Monte Albán ruins.

And all these ornithological and cultural wonders were accompanied every day by special meals of typical Oaxacan or Mexican cuisine. Our Oaxaca Christmas tour proved a wonderful combination of birds, cultural traditions, and rich, typical foods.

ITINERARY:

Day 1, December 20.

Travel to Oaxaca City, check-in at the Hotel Victoria. In evening, met with guide Héctor Gómez de Silva for a get-acquainted dinner at the Hotel Victoria restaurant (except people arriving around midnight).

Day 2, December 21 - We spent our first morning birding in thorn scrub below Monte Albán, followed by a tour of the ruins. After brunch at the Hotel Misión de los Ángeles, we traveled downtown to visit the ornate Santo Domingo church and view the treasure from Monte Alban's Tomb 7 in the adjacent Santo Domingo museum. Dinner at Los Danzantes.

Day 3, December 22 - In the morning we drove all the way up to the village of Arroyo Guacamaya where we had a delightful time birding the apple orchard and then drove on up to the pine forest. Lunch was at a rustic restaurant in Arroyo Guacamaya. In the afternoon we went to see the alebrijes at San Antonio Arrazola. Dinner: Restaurant El Naranjo.

Day 4, December 23 - Christmas Bird Count day. This morning we drove up to the mountains north of Oaxaca City, where we had breakfast at Restaurant del Paso. After breakfast we birded La Cumbre (west side). Lunch was at nearby Café Colibrí and was followed by a bit of birding, but the main afternoon birding was at the San Andrés Huayapam reservoir. In the late afternoon, *Noche de Rábanos* (Night of the Radishes). Dinner: Catedral Restaurant. In the late afternoon, down to the *zócalo* for *Noche de Rábanos* (Night of the Radishes). Dinner at Restaurant Catedral.

Day 5, December 24 - We spent this morning birding in the reservoir, thorn scrub pine-oak forest above Teotitlán del Valle. Lunch was near Teotitlán at Restaurant El Patio, and after lunch we returned to Teotitlán for a demonstration of the centuries-old technique of rug making with natural dyes, and rug shopping. Christmas eve dinner in the *zócalo* at Hotel Mesón del Marqués..

Day 6, December 25 - This morning we traveled to Yagul in the eastern end of the Oaxaca Valley, stopping on the way to visit the Tule tree. After birding the driveway to Yagul and exploring the Yagul ruins, we stopped for lunch at Restaurant Rancho Zapata and saw a demonstration of mezcal making at the Beneval mezcal factory. In the afternoon, we visited Mitla archaeological site. Dinner was at Catedral Restaurant.

Day 7, December 26 - We risked a very long drive to a stakeout for Bumblebee Hummingbird in the Sierra Madre del Sur and beyond that the village of La Soledad for Blue-capped Hummingbird (endemic to a very limited area). After getting our two targets and a few other birds, on our drive back we had lunch at San José del Pacífico, then stopped for sightseeing at the ornate churches of San Agustín de los Cansecos and Ocotlán. This was followed by a visit to the black pottery makers at San Bartolo Ocotepc. Dinner was at El Naranjo

Day 8, December 27 - To sample the bird's of Oaxaca's Pacific slope thorn forest, we drove 114 km towards Tehuantepec and back, stopping at several places for birding (though most was at and near San Juan Guegoyache) and having lunch at San José de Gracia. Dinner was in the *zócalo* at El Asador Vasco.

Day 9, December 28 - This morning we birded the thorn scrub of the lower slopes of Highway 175 North, followed by another Oaxacan brunch at the Hotel Misión de los Ángeles. The afternoon was free and some people chose to relax at the hotel whereas others (who had missed Montalbán on Day 2), went to the Montalbán ruins.

Day 10, December 29 - Departing flights to Mexico City and the US.

LOCATION KEY

C = La Cumbre, west. Pine and pine-oak forest.

G = Guacamaya. Apple orchard, some high-elevation pine forest.

L = Lower slopes of Hwy. 175 North. Arid thorn scrub and scrub oak, with nearby perennial stream.

M = Monte Albán archaeological site. Disturbed thorn scrub/oak scrub.

T = Teotitlán del Valle and several habitats above the town.

V = Oaxaca Valley bottom. Includes roads, agricultural habitats and disturbed areas within the valley floor arid scrub zone.

W = Widespread at all elevations.

Y = Yagul ruins and vicinity. Valley thorn scrub.

P = Pacific thorn forest on road to Tehuantepec.

S = Sierra Madre del Sur

H = Huayapam reservoir

BIRDS OBSERVED

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. Underlined species are rare or unusual for the area of the tour.

SWANS, GEESE & DUCKS (Anatidae)

Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*) – T, one at P

Cinamon Teal (*Anas cyanoptera*) – one male at T

Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*)—several males and females at T

Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*)—several males and females at T

GREBES (Podicipedidae)

Least Grebe (*Tachybaptus dominicus*) – T, reservoir near G

Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*)—1 at H

BITTERN & HERONS (Ardeidae)

Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) – one on an agricultural field at T.

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) – V

Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) – one at T

Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) – V

AMERICAN VULTURES (Cathartidae)

Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) – V

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) – W

EAGLES, HAWKS & ALLIES (Accipitridae)

White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*) – V

Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) – V on our return from S

Zone-tailed Hawk (*Buteo albonotatus*)—one soaring over M

Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – G, T

FALCONS (Falconidae)

Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) – V

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) – V

Merlin (*Falco peregrinus*) – beautiful view of a male at H.

RAILS, GALLINULES & COOTS (Rallidae)

American Coot (*Fulica americana*)—H, reservoir near G

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES (Scolopacidae)

Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*) – T

PIGEONS & DOVES (Columbidae)

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*) – V; common in and around towns

Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) – V

White-winged Dove (*Zenaida asiatica*) – V

Inca Dove (*Columbina inca*) – V. The common small dove of the valley

CUCKOOS (Cuculidae)

Lesser Roadrunner (*Geococcyx velox*)—2 at S and 1 at P

Groove-billed Ani (*Crotophaga sulcirostris*)—1 glimpsed by Héctor at V on the way back from S

TYPICAL OWLS (Strigidae)

Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium brasilianum*)—1 at P responded from very far away to tape-recorded, and we were able to walk 200 m to where it was perched

HUMMINGBIRDS (Trochilidae)

Green Violet-ear (*Colibri thalassinus*) – C, G. Persistent "tick-tick" call

Dusky Hummingbird (*Cyanthus sordidus*) – V. Common at lower-elevations in the valley. A Oaxaca-Guerrero endemic.

White-eared Hummingbird (*Hylocharis leucotis*) – C, G. A very common high elevation hummer. The second most numerous bird on the Christmas Bird Count.

Berylline Hummingbird (*Saucerottia beryllina*) – M, L.

Blue-capped Hummingbird (*Eupherusa cyanophrys*)—1 male at S. Endemic to a narrow altitudinal belt in S.

Blue-throated Hummingbird (*Lampornis clemenciae*) – 1 at G. This species ranges to extreme SW Arizona in summer, but is otherwise restricted to the highlands of Mexico.

Magnificent Hummingbird (*Eugenes fulgens*) – C.

Beautiful Hummingbird (*Calothorax pucher*) – M, Y. Another highly local Oaxaca-Guerrero endemic.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) – M, Y

Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*) – M

Bumblebee Hummingbird (*Atthis heloisa*)—1 male at S. A bird with personality and charm.

TROGONS (Trogonidae)

Mountain Trogon (*Trogon mexicanus*) – G, C. 6 on the Christmas Bird Count was encouraging.

MOTMOTS (Momotidae)

Russet-crowned Motmot (*Momotus mexicanus*)—1 stunning view at P

WOODPECKERS & ALLIES (Picidae)

Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*)—a few above T

Gray-breasted Woodpecker (*Melanerpes hypopoli*) – Y, T, L, B G. Another range-restricted Oaxaca-Guerrero endemic.

Golden-fronted Woodpecker (*Melanerpes aurifrons*)—1 at P.

Ladder-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides scalaris*) – M, H, Y, L

Hairy Woodpecker (*Picoides vilosus*)– 1 at C

OVENBIRDS AND WOODCREEPERS (Furnariidae)

Spot-crowned Woodcreeper (*Lepidocolaptes affinis*)—1 at G, also 1 heard at C

FLYCATCHERS & ALLIES (Tyrannidae)

Northern Beardless Tyrannulet (*Camptostoma imberbe*) – 1 heard at Hotel Victoria, 1 heard at P

Pileated Flycatcher (*Xenotriccus mexicanus*) – M.

Tufted Flycatcher (*Mitrephanes phaeocercus*) – below G, H.
 Greater Pewee (*Contopus pertinax*) – T, G.
 Hammond's Flycatcher (*Empidonax hammondii*) – C, T
Pine Flycatcher (*Empidonax affinis*) – S. Long wings, long beak.
 Dusky Flycatcher (*Empidonax oberholseri*) – M
 Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) – T
 Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) – W
 Dusky-capped Flycatcher (*Myiarchus tuberculifer*) – T.
 Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*) – P
 Nutting's Flycatcher (*Myiarchus nuttingii*) – Y.
 Brown-crested Flycatcher (*Myiarchus tyrannulus*)--2 at P
 Great Kiskadee (*Pitangus sulphuratus*) – heard only!
 Social Flycatcher (*Myiozetetes similis*) – parking lot of Hotel Misión de los Ángeles
 Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) – Santo Domingo botanical garden, black pottery village
 Cassin's Kingbird (*Tyrannus vociferans*) – V. The commonest kingbird in the Oaxaca Valley in winter.
Thick-billed Kingbird (*Tyrannus crassirostris*) – one at M
 Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) – Santo Domingo botanical garden

Generae incertae sedis

Rose-throated Becard (*Pachyramphus aglaiae*) – C. As usual there, seen following flocks of jays and Gray-barred Wrens.

SHRIKES (Laniidae)

Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) – V

VIREOS and ALLIES (Vireonidae)

Slaty Vireo (*Vireo brevipennis*) – seen by some below G, heard at L.

Cassin's Vireo (*Vireo cassinis*) – singles at S, C and T.

Hutton's Vireo (*Vireo huttoni*) – C.

Warbling Vireo (*Vireo gilvus*) – W

Golden Vireo (*Vireo hypochryseus*) – singles at M and S

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS (Corvidae)

Steller's Jay (*Cyanocitta stellari coronatus*) – C, G. The distinctive *coronatus* subspecies. The most numerous bird on the Christmas Bird Count.

Dwarf Jay (*Cyanolyca nana*) – C; These secretive jays frequently follow flocks of Grey-barred wrens, but are much harder to see and hear. Another very local endemic, restricted to the highest pine-oak forests of northern Oaxaca, Puebla, and adjacent Veracruz (but in recent years, only ever seen in Oaxaca).

Green Jay (*Cyanocorax yncas*)—1 glimpsed by some at S

White-throated Magpie-Jay (*Calocitta formosa*)—a small flock at P

Western Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*) – T

Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) – 2 at T

SWALLOWS (Hirundinidae)

Violet-green Swallow (*Tachycineta thalassina*) – M

Northern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*) – 1 at M

CHICKADEES & TITMICE (Paridae)

Mexican Chickadee (*Poecile sclateri*) – C

Bridled Titmouse (*Baeolophus wollweberi*) – seen by one participant above T. In oak scrub, above the thorn scrub but below the tall pines.

LONG-TAILED TITS (Aegithalidae)

Bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*)—G, the distinctive black-eared form

NUTHATCHES (Sittidae)

White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*)—1 or a few heard above T.

CREEPERS (Certhiidae)

Brown Creeper (*Certhia americana*) – 1 at C

WRENS (Troglodytidae)

Gray-barred Wren (*Campylorhynchus megalopterus*) – C. This Mexican highland endemic travels in large, noisy flocks

Boucard's Wren (*Campylorhynchus megalopterus*) – T, Y. A Oaxaca-Guerrero endemic, characteristic of cactus-dominated thorn scrub vegetation.

Rock Wren (*Salpinctes obsoletus*) – M, Y

Canyon Wren (*Catherpes mexicanus*)—heard at T

Bewick's Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*) – V

Happy Wren (*Thryothorus felix*)—heard at L

Brown-throated [House] Wren (*Troglodytes aedon brunneicollis*) – heard at G. Restricted to high elevations, and considered a separate species by some taxonomists.

KINGLETS (Regulidae)

Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*) – C, T, L

OLD WORLD WARBLERS (Sylviidae)

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*) – V

White-lored Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila albiloris*)—a few at P

THRUSHES & ALLIES (Turdidae)

Brown-backed Solitaire (*Myadestes occidentalis*) – G, S. Also heard at C, T. The tumbling song of this species is one of the characteristic sounds of the Mexican highlands.

Russet Nightingale-Thrush (*Catharus occidentalis*) – 1 at C

Clay-colored Robin (*Turdus grayi*)—one at the Santo Domingo botanical gardens was the only one of the trip

White-throated Robin (*Turdus assimilis*) – G, T, S

Rufous-backed Robin (*Turdus rufopalliatu*s) – Hotel Misión de los Ángeles

American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) – G

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS (Mimidae)

Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) – Y, on the way to S

Ocellated Thrasher (*Toxostoma ocellatum*) – B. Heard only, at Microondas Ocotlán and L.

Curve-billed Thrasher (*Toxostoma curvirostre*) – Y

Blue Mockingbird (*Melanotis caerulescens*) – heard at M, glimpsed at apple orchard in G

WAGTAILS & PIPITS (Motacillidae)

American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*)—one on reservoir at T

SILKY-FLYCATCHERS (Ptilonotidae)

Gray Silky-Flycatcher (*Ptilonotus cinereus*) – heard M, seen at T and S

OLIVE WARBLER (Peucedramidae)

Olive Warbler (*Peucedramus taeniatus*) – 1 nice male at restaurant in C

WOOD WARBLERS (Parulidae)

Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*) – W. Widespread in highlands.

Nashville Warbler (*Vermivora ruficapilla*)—1 at M

Virginia's Warbler (*Vermivora virginiae*)—2 at M, 1 at P

Crescent-chested Warbler (*Parula superciliosa*) – G, 1 at T

Yellow-rumped (“Audubon’s”) Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*) – W

Yellow-rumped (“Myrtle”) Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*) – 1 at H

Black-throated Gray Warbler (*Dendroica nigrescens*) – M, T

Townsend’s Warbler (*Dendroica townsendii*) – W in highlands

Hermit Warbler – (*Dendroica occidentalis*) – G, T, C

Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*) – C, L

MacGillivray’s Warbler (*Oporornis tolmei*) – C

Wilson’s Warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla*) – C, T

Red-faced Warbler (*Cardelina rubrifrons*) – C, T

Red Warbler (*Ergaticus ruber*) – C, T. This striking warbler is entirely restricted to Mexican pine-oak forest.

Painted Redstart (*Myioborus pictus*) – T

Slate-throated Redstart (*Myioborus miniatus*) – H, T.

Rufous-capped Warbler (*Basileuterus rufifrons*) –M, C, T.

Golden-browed Warbler (*Basileuterus belli*)—1 at T

TANAGERS (Thraupidae)

Hepatic Tanager (*Piranga flava*) – C, Y

Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*)—1 nice male feeding at the apple orchard

Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*) – M, G, Y

SPARROWS & ALLIES (Emberizidae)

Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer (*Diglossa baritula*) – 1 female at T. Possibly more closely related to the tanagers, the Flowerpiercer's unique bill structure enables it to feed on nectar by puncturing the bases of tubular flowers.

Rufous-capped Brush-Finch (*Atlapetes pileatus*) – 1 at restaurant at C

Collared Towhee (*Pipilo ocai*) – G, T

Spotted (Rufous-sided) Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*) – G, C, L.

White-throated Towhee (*Pipilo albicollis*) – V. Common throughout the valley at lower elevations, this species is almost entirely restricted to the state of Oaxaca

Bridled Sparrow (*Aimophila mysticalis*) – Y, also seen by one participant at P. A handsome sparrow with a very restricted range.

Oaxaca Sparrow (*Aimophila notosticta*) – L.

Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) – H, M, T.

Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*)—Y

Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*) – near the alebrijes village

Yellow-eyed Junco (*Junco phaeonotus*) – T, C, G

CARDINALS, GROSBEAKS & ALLIES (Cardinalidae)

Black-headed Grosbeak (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*) – M, G

Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*) –G

Blue Grosbeak (*Passerina caerulea*) – 1 female at Y

Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) – L

Lazuli Bunting (*Passerina amoena*)—2 at M!

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES (Icteridae)

Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) – V

Bronzed Cowbird (*Molothrus aeneus*) – Santo Domingo botanical garden, S

Bullock’s Oriole (*Icterus bullockii*) – G, H

Black-backed Oriole (*Icterus abeillei*) – S. Endemic to pine forests of central and southern Mexico.

Black-vented Oriole (*Icterus wagleri*) – M, L. A near-endemic; this species ranges from southern Sonora to northern Nicaragua.

Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*)—1 female at S

Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*)—1 at H, 1 at Misión de los Ángeles

Audubon's Oriole (*Icterus graduacauda*) – 1 at L

Scott's Oriole (*Icterus parisorum*) – 1 female at L

Streak-backed Oriole (*Icterus pustulatus*)—1 at T!, a few at P

FINCHES (Fringillidae)

House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) – W

Red Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostre*)--G

Black-headed Siskin (*Carduelis notata*) – 1 at G.

Lesser Goldfinch (*Carduelis psaltria*) – V

Elegant (Blue-hooded) Euphonia (*Euphonia elegantissima*) – T, L. This beautiful species is usually found at clumps of mistletoe.

OLD WORLD SPARROWS (Passeridae)

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) – V

Total: 161 species

