



## VERACRUZ Post-ABA Conference CATEMACO Tour Oct 10-13, 2009

Trip report and photos by Robert Straub

Leaders: Robert Straub, Roque Antonio, Braulio Malega (Ruiz Cortinez)

Mexican endemic birds in **bold** print.

### Day 1 - Saturday, October 10

Last night we said our good-byes to our new and old friends from the ABA Veracruz "River of Raptors" conference in Xalapa, and got a good night's sleep in preparation for our early breakfast start to our post-conference adventure in southern Veracruz.

En route to Catemaco and after about 2 hours of driving, we stopped near Alvarado at Las Barrancas, a natural savanna and seasonally-flooded wetland in the flat coastal plain of Veracruz. Although we had some rain on the way from Xalapa, the weather was wonderful here and for the remainder of the tour. Once off the highway and on the Las Barrancas road (*below*) we scanned the fields for Double-striped Thick-knee. We quickly found several birds, right where they should have been! This was a great start and a new species for many in the group. This wonderful shorebird which reaches well into South America is close to the northern extent of its range here. Soon afterwards, we had groups of migrants flying overhead, including several aquatic birds such as Great Blue Heron and Great Egret, Wood Stork, and White and White-faced Ibis, and a fly-by Zone-tailed Hawk. In a small pond just off the road, the ibis were accompanied by several beautiful Roseate Spoonbills.

Eastern Meadowlarks, a resident species here, were common in the fields, on posts, and on the road. We stopped by some bushes and small trees and soon had several birds respond to pishing, including Yellow-breasted Chat, and great looks at Tropical Mockingbird. A Laughing Falcon was spotted by Todd and seen in all the scopes.



Shortly thereafter, Roque and I spotted a large bird flying across the road. A quick look, and we shouted “bittern!”, and then “Pinnated Bittern!”, once we saw the lack of a malar stripe. The bird landed in the grass nearby, but everyone saw the bird again before it skillfully hid itself in the grass. As we were getting back on the bus to continue down the road, the bittern flew back towards us and perched even closer. For those who had not yet gotten on the bus, they had even better views than before! We then continued down the road reaching a spot where we could scan distant trees full of roosting vultures. Here we tried to find Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture among the many Turkeys and Blacks. Fortunately, and with scopes, we spotted all three perched in the same scope view! Soon thereafter, and on other days, we had wonderful views of this bird flying low over the savanna and marshes.

Farther down the road, we saw several Mangrove Swallow perched on wires, and when we reached a small pond there seemed to be a Little Blue Heron or Yellow-crowned Night-Heron on nearly every fence post. A Roadside Hawk was heard calling and spotted nearby, as well as several Crested Caracaras. We found a Pied-billed Grebe on the pond and a Northern Jacana with several adorable young birds in tow. Back on the bus and a few hundred meters later we had a spectacular show of two Aplomado Falcons cruising effortlessly in the wind while hunting. This was most likely a male and female pair (notable size difference) and they seemed to be socializing and hunting in unison. We watched these wonderful birds until they perched and we were able to see them in our spotting scopes.



Nearby a small dove came onto the road, only a few meters away, and we quickly realized it was a Plain-breasted Ground-Dove (*left*), a savanna specialist. This bird stayed with us for many minutes for wonderful study and photo opportunities. Then, an aerial show rivaling that of the falcons was put on by two Fork-tailed Flycatchers, most likely male and female, the male with an impressively long tail. Back on the highway and on our drive through the wetlands, we saw Snail Kite, more looks at Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, and a Limpkin perched on a fence post.

We reached the Los Tuxtlas Mountains, an isolated volcanic range, and the picturesque caldera Lake Catemaco, with a few hours left of daylight. We were now in quite different habitat than the savannah and wetlands we visited in the morning, and the lush tropical rainforest on the shore of the lake at Nanciyaga proved productive. Spot-breasted Wren and Red-throated Ant-Tanager were very cooperative, and several participants saw beautiful male Hooded and Kentucky Warblers. On the edge of the marsh we picked out a White-throated Flycatcher, an *empidonax* flycatcher, which is a highland breeder that winters in the lowland marshes of both coasts.

Once on the docks (*right*), which stretch into the lilies and reeds lining the lake, we began our search for Ruddy Crake, a bird often heard but not often seen. A couple of crakes responded to our calls and slowly inched closer. While we were intensively scanning the thick vegetation for them (where they usually occur), Nancy, Braulio’s 11-year-old daughter, who we were glad to have join us for the afternoon, told her father to look down the reeds at two birds delicately perched about 3 feet high. Braulio then ran over to me and excitedly told me about the birds. Sure enough two Ruddy Crakes were perched high and dry for everyone to see! We ended the day on a high note as we headed to our lakeside hotel.



## Day 2 - Sunday, October 11

For many of us the spectacular thunder and lightning storm during the night over the lake and hotel was the most impressive of our lives. Fortunately our morning started with clear skies, which lasted all day.

We started early for the rainforest beginning around the UNAM Biological Station. Just after sunrise we reached a high point on the edge of the reserve to watch the many pairs of Red-lored Parrots as they flew out of their roosts. Other birds here included Keel-billed Toucan, a beautiful adult Gray Hawk, and Long-billed Hermit. As we entered the rainforest, we had Streak-headed and Ivory-billed Woodcreeper,



a group of Red-throated Ant-Tanager, and a Collared Trogon. Then, Blaise found an ant swarm for us, the hard way(!) Nearby a Blue-crowned Motmot was ready to scarf-up any escaping insects, and our good samaritan deed for the day was to rescue a lizard caught in the swarm with several biting ants attached. While Leslie held the lizard I used the pliers on my pocket knife to remove the ants, and some were even in its mouth. We happily released the lizard down the road. Reaching the clearing at the station, the resident pair of Black-and-white Owls (*left*) were on their favorite branch in plain view! Everyone had plenty of time to thoroughly enjoy these marvelous birds.

After a mid-morning break with snacks and hot coffee, we headed up a side road, along the edge of the reserve where a Long-tailed Hermit buzz right passed us. There was a small group of Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, well seen by all, a couple of Lesser Greenlet, and a nice look at a Wood Thrush. Farther up the road, several Violaceous Trogons were busy feeding, even perching in the open on the electric cables. A parasitic plant full of flowers hosted a Long-billed Starthroat, and just up the road, the local pair of Bat Falcons were quite active, zooming back and forth hunting insects in high gear, the only speed they know. On the walk back we had nice looks at Collared Aracari and the buff-throated form of Black-headed Saltator, but alas we did not see Buff-throated Saltator. We had marvelous views of both females and sharp-looking male Masked and Black-crowned Tityras. While watching the saltators, out of the corner of my eye I saw that a large white raptor crossed the road. Calling out "White Hawk", we all looked up and watched this spectacular bird fly by. Having heard it earlier, we were delighted to get a look at this tropical beauty, and it did not disappoint. Part of the group then had a brilliant male Violet Sabrewing, perched and easily viewed.

It was onto the bus for the short ride to lunch and the afternoon boat ride that we were all looking forward to.

After our delicious lunch of local fish and quesadillas, with hand-made tortillas, we headed to the docks. There, our boatman Ismael and his son got our boats ready and we hopped aboard. Quickly we saw two huge male Green Iguanas and further up the channel an Amazon Kingfisher flew by, easily identified by its massive bill and green color. Upon reaching the open lagoon the two boats separated each heading to distinct tributary rivers, switching tributaries later on. Our boat headed for the larger of the two rivers, where we saw a lovely adult Common Black Hawk, and several of the many Yellow-crowned Night-Herons that were stalking along the river's edge. There was a good opportunity for us to study both adults and immature of this species with the similar Black-crowned Night-Herons. We watched Aztec (Orange-fronted) Parakeets in a fruiting tree, and a shy adult male Black-headed Trogon put in an appearance.



Stopping at the riverside flower banks we had a beautiful male Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. Perhaps the highlight of the boat trip, for our boat, was when we came across two large, black, red-headed woodpeckers arguing for position on a dead tree trunk. One was identified as a male Lineated Woodpecker by the stripes on the back not coming together in a “V”, and by the red being limited to only the upper half of the head. After careful views, the other woodpecker turned out to be a Pale-billed Woodpecker, a male, with a full red head and a clear “V” on the back. This was very exciting to not only have both species together, but on the same tree - an unusual occurrence. Having wound our way through the narrow channels we returned back to the open lagoon, where Laughing Gulls and Neotropic Cormorants were common, and an occasional Osprey was sighted.

The two boats then crossed paths as our boat entered the

smaller tributary. The second boat reported Yellow-tailed Oriole as a highlight. We were on the lookout for Gray-necked Wood-Rail and Sungrebe, when Todd spotted the latter upriver. I was able to get a brief view as we moved up to the spot, but when we arrived the bird, as they are prone to do, had disappeared into the dense overhanging riverside vegetation.



After a wonderful diverse dinner, that had some of us tasting freshwater eel, a local specialty, a few folks joined Roque and I for some owling nearby. We returned to our lakeside rainforest site and on the dirt road I imitated the Mottled Owl and Spectacled Owl. Very quickly several Mottled Owls were heard calling. One male and one female moved in closer to us and eventually we got a light on the male, in time for Carol to get a nice photo. For most of the participants it was a first time owling in the tropics and for some the first time seeing an owl at night. It was quite exciting and fortunately not too far from the hotel, making for an early evening!

### Day 3 - Monday, October 12

Today we headed to Braulio's hometown, Ruiz Cortinez, home to spectacularly beautiful cloud forest rising over 1,000 meters. This site is home to the **Tuxtla Quail-Dove**, a bird only found in the higher elevations of the Los Tuxtlas Mountains of Southern Veracruz.

We started walking on the paved road that cuts through the forest and quickly found “**Plain-breasted**” **Brush-Finch**, a local subspecies of Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch, found only in the Los Tuxtlas Mountains. We then heard a Barred Forest-Falcon calling frequently, close-by, but we could not locate this secretive bird. A juvenile Slate-colored Solitaire caught our attention and was seen well.



Nearby we found Scaly-throated and Buff-throated Foliage-gleaners, as well as Spot-crowned and Ivory-billed Woodcreepers. We heard a Bright-rumped Attila and were able to see this bird fairly well, even as it remained high in the canopy. Across the road a strange call peeked our curiosity, and after searching the understory we located the source, a young Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush. Farther up the road we found an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and we tried to coax a White-breasted Wood-Wren into the open, where several of group were able to see it. Other birds included Dusky-capped Flycatcher and both Northern and Louisiana Waterthrush.

We then made our way to two trailheads that cut into the cloud forest. Splitting into two smaller groups to try for **Tuxtla Quail-Dove**, Braulio and Roque led one group, and I escorted the other into the woods. Both groups reported hearing the quail-dove (our group had two individuals), and while all these individual birds were within 20 feet or so, we were unable to see any! Although frustrated, we all understood that this is how quail-doves often behave. Our group continued down the trail and saw some beautiful birds, including good views of Eye-ringed Flatbill, **Long-tailed Sabrewing**, White-breasted Wood-Wren, and Golden-crowned Warbler. Rick, always looking for other interesting creatures, found a salamander, which we all enjoyed. Returning to where we previously heard the quail-doves, we could hear them calling as they moved away up the hill, yet we still could not locate one!

At the edge of the forest, Roque's group located a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. In response to our tooting, a smorgasbord of birds showed up to mob the owl. This active party included Bananaquit, **Long-tailed Sabrewing**, White-bellied Emerald, Spot-breasted Wren, Blue-winged Warbler, Common Bush-Tanager, a group of half a dozen or so Red-legged Honeycreepers, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, and Scrub and Yellow-throated Euphonia! To top off this great experience two Black Hawk-Eagles were spotted soaring and courting right above us before moving away over distant wooded hills.



Walking a little ways through the open fields on the edge of town, we all saw two **Rufous-capped Warblers**, followed by a Yellow-faced Grassquit, Lesser Goldfinch, and "Southern" House Wren. Braulio brought his truck to drive several folks into town while the rest of us walked to his family's restaurant - "Colibries" or Hummingbirds (*left*) - which is part of the "Los Clarines" community ecotourism group.

For our last night of the tour we met outside our hotel in the zocalo, or main square, of Veracruz. Sitting at one of the many restaurants with open-air tables we enjoyed a drink and wonderful conversation as we watched all the bustling activity around the beautiful square. It was only a short walk

across the zocalo to our restaurant, where we had an excellent seafood dinner. Starters included crab and seafood salads which were followed by a selection of fresh fish dishes for our main course that we all shared. Compliments were offered especially for the coconut shrimp, shrimp in a sweet-and-sour tamarind sauce, red snapper a la Veracruzana, and the garlic-grilled fish. We compiled our check-list for the day and everyone shared their many highlights of the trip, before retiring to our hotel to get a good nights sleep in preparation for the journey back to the States.

Thanks for a wonderful trip!  
Robert Straub, Xalapa, Veracruz