



VERACRUZ Pre-ABA Conference ENDEMICS Tour Oct 1-4, 2009

Trip report and photos by Robert Straub
Hummingbird photos by Scott Holt

Leaders: Robert Straub, Jim Danzenbacker, Braulio Malega (Ruiz Cortinez)

Mexican endemic birds in **bold** print.

Day 1 - Thursday, October 1

Several tour participants arrived early in the afternoon, or the day before, so we started our Veracruz Endemics adventure with some afternoon birding on the grounds behind the Hotel Mocambo, and down to the beach, of course on the Gulf of Mexico. Several of the group were able to re-acquaint themselves with some common tropical lowland species, like Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Social and Boat-billed Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, and Band-backed Wren, and also with some migrant species, such as Baltimore Oriole, Yellow-throated and Yellow Warbler. A few Eastern/Western Wood-Pewees were sallying for insects and one called, an Eastern (a common ID challenge here in Veracruz, where Eastern and Western North American migrants can be found side-by-side). Down on the beach and on the jetties we saw Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebird, Willet, a friendly group of Sanderlings, Ruddy Turnstone, Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plover, Laughing Gull, Royal and Sandwich Terns, and a flyby Peregrine Falcon.



We topped a productive afternoon walk with a fantastic seafood dinner at the hotel, with fresh fish brought in that day from the Gulf!

Day 2 - Friday, October 2

After an early breakfast, we headed from sea level to over 1,000 meters in less than 2 hours to the forested limestone hills outside of Cordoba, Veracruz, near the small town of Amatlan. Here we find the exclusive habitat of our first endemic bird of the trip, the **Sumichrast's Wren**. A scouting visit a few days prior found the bird in the lowest part of the hill, meaning just a short hike in. Gratefully, conditions were dry, as it had not rained for about a week before our visit. Actually, we had very little rain for this trip, the entire week of the ABA Conference, and also our post-trip, a very unlikely circumstance given

that September and October fall at the end of the rainy season and into the tropical storm season...how lucky we were!



As we entered this beautiful forest, full of early morning birds, right on cue the wren answered the “taped” call up the hill a bit. I tried again, and eventually the bird came closer, so we hiked up the trail just a bit until we were very close to the singing bird. Indeed, we were close! Although we had the bird sometimes less than 15 feet away, with some of us lying on our sides or leaning down on our knees, at first it was only Jim (Danzenbaker, co-leader), and Scott that got decent looks at the bird. Some of us moved up the trail a few meters and coaxed the bird out into the open, where many others in the group got stellar views of the bird, as it hopped on the ground, in the rocks, and appeared and disappeared in the crevices of large rocks on the side of the trail.

For the few that did not see the bird, we moved up the trail a little more, and although the bird kept singing we could not get a satisfactory look. We decided to move downhill to where I had the bird on the previous scouting trip, and sure enough one was singing. It was cooperative coming in very close, hopping on rocks and amongst the trees and most of those that had not had decent views of it got to see it until it dropped down into the forest.

While we were looking for the wren, and trying to keep still and quiet, many other birds were observed, including a large flock of White-crowned Parrots, groups of White-crowned and Red-lored Parrots, Montezuma Oropendola, and we heard a Violaceous Trogon and a distant Laughing Falcon.

Jim escorted the group that first saw the bird onto another trail and after a while the 2 groups merged for more birding, finding both migrants and residents, including **White-bellied Wren**, Bananaquit, Yellow-throated Euphonia, Golden-crowned Warbler, Common Bush-Tanager, Summer Tanager, Tropical Parula, and Black-throated Green Warbler. Hummingbirds seen here were White-bellied Emerald, the endemic **Wedge-tailed Sabrewing** (*right*), and a quick look at Stripe-throated Hermit. We also had nice looks at a Louisiana Waterthrush.

On our retreat and short walk out, a Ferruginous Pygmy Owl responded to whistled imitations, and came into full view. As we were watching it in binoculars and scopes, many other birds were soon excited and mobbing the owl. A group of White-winged Tanagers came in-and-out of view, as well as Black-and-White Warbler, American Redstart, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, and Clay-colored Thrush, among others.

We had to pry ourselves away from this very birdy scene and walk the 200 yards or so to the vans. In short time we arrived for “brunch” at the Italian Coffee Company, an oasis in Mexico on highways in this area of the country, where we enjoyed delicious baguettes and wonderful coffee.

From Amatlan, we drove east towards the coast heading for our next destination, the Los Tuxtlas Mountains and Catemaco. This drive, on smooth, rapid, and safe toll highways, took us through the humid lowlands and wetlands of the Papaloapan drainage. The rains of September had flooded the wetlands to a water level too high for many of the aquatic birds we usually



see this time of year in this area. However, we did see many birds, including both Fulvous and Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Anhinga, Snail Kite, and many Northern Jacana.

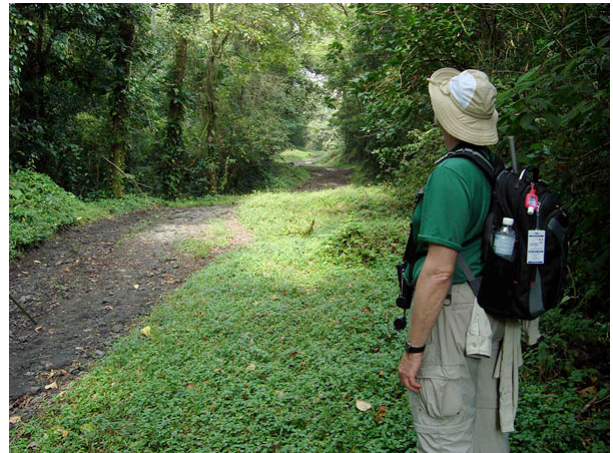
Our luck with the weather continued as we entered the Los Tuxtlas Mountains and the San Martín Volcano was clearly visible from the highway. We decided to take advantage of these conditions and make the short 20-minute drive to Ruiz Cortinez, home to the **Tuxtla Quail-Dove**, and the easiest (by far) access to the bird's preferred cloud forest habitat, above 1,000 meters. Prior to our "discovery" of this site a few years ago, and the new paved highway, trip reports exist of adventures of hours of driving and hiking just to get close to the bird and its habitat!

Our local guide, Braulio Malega, from Ruiz Cortinez and the "Los Clarines" community tourism group, met us below on the main highway, where the road up to Ruiz Cortinez begins. We drove directly to the prime habitat, and started walking. Soon thereafter, Braulio's imitations of the quail-dove received a response from 2 birds, fairly close to the road. We bunched up and got closer, hearing the birds several times, but could not get good looks into the dense understory. Although we did not see the quail-dove today, we saw many other fine birds on our walk, such as the endemic **Long-tailed Sabrewing**, a brief glance at a Slaty-breasted Tinamou crossing the road, a lovely female Collared Trogon, Blue-crowned Motmot, great looks at acrobatic Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner, Ivory-billed and Spot-crowned Woodcreepers, White-throated Thrush, Blue-winged Warbler, **Rufous-capped Warbler** and Red-legged Honeycreeper. For the day we added both Red-throated and Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, and although common, White-breasted Wood-Wren was seen by a few, but more often heard!

After this incredibly diverse and productive day, and 102 species tallied, we made it to Lake Catemaco with plenty of daylight to enjoy the view from our lakeside hotel before cocktails and dinner.

Day 3 - Saturday, October 3

We started the day with another early breakfast at the hotel, and made our way back to Ruiz Cortinez in search of the quail-dove and other birds. We started our hike on the other side of town, on a dirt road, where the quail-dove is often observed. Unfortunately the birds were not receptive this morning, but we nevertheless enjoyed a wonderful walk in the beautiful cloud forest and great birds. Highlights included good looks of Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner, most of the group got nice looks once again of **Long-tailed Sabrewing**, Yellowish Flycatcher, Golden-olive Woodpecker, a Stripe-throated Hermit feeding only a few feet from Jeanne, a perched female Blue Ground-Dove, and Jim picked out Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift overhead. We heard **Slate-colored Solitaire** and saw many White-throated Thrushes well, Tennessee Warbler, and great looks at the local "**Plain-breasted**" **Brush-Finch**, a subspecies of Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch. We had a wonderful view of a pair of **Blue-crowned Chlorophonia** feeding over the trail on mistletoe, and even saw them in our scopes as they very patiently tolerated our presence, just 30 feet or so below them. We heard a Barred Forest-Falcon and it responded to our imitations. We figured there were 3 individuals, and at least two crossed the road several times, giving us great looks of the bird in flight, but it was impossible to locate this wily bird while it was perched, even though it continued calling and was not too far away. This raptor is a well-known ventriloquist, often perched higher than it appears, but alas, they did not want to be seen perched this morning! Back at the vehicles we scanned the skies for raptors and only a few of us saw a Black Hawk-Eagle as it circled a couple of times and then disappeared behind the hills (to be seen later, see below!)



At mid-day we made it back into town for a wonderful lunch, and Joan had her best fish of the trip, fresh from the spring-water pond behind the restaurant and smothered in garlic. The town is surrounded by hills covered in cloud forest and the town itself has nice gardens, so birding continued before and after our meal. Some common birds included Lesser Goldfinch, both Tropical and Couch's Kingbird, Yellow-winged and Blue-gray Tanager, and "Southern" House Wren. Then, we had spectacular looks at not one but two Black Hawk-Eagles flying and circling above town. As we were enjoying these magnificent raptors, the ladies of the restaurant called to us that lunch was ready, but someone happened to look towards the distant hills and spotted a huge kettle of migrating Broad-winged Hawks. We called everyone over and in only 10 minutes or so approximately 10,000 to 15,000 of these hawks passed by as they kettled and streamed off to the south - a spectacular introduction to the River of Raptors!

We had to leave Ruiz Cortinez after lunch and make our way north to our next destination in Xalapa, at about 1,250 meters in elevation, and site of the ABA "River of Raptors" Conference. En route, we passed through the Alvarado wetlands and enjoyed again many of the lowland birds. We added several birds requested by the group, including Mangrove Swallow, Limpkin, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Aplomado Falcon, and spectacular looks from the bus at a pair of Great Black-Hawks hunting in the marsh, one with a small turtle in its talons!

We ended another full and diverse day in Xalapa, with 103 species for our efforts.

Day 4 - Sunday, October 4

We started our last day of the pre-tour with another early breakfast at the hotel and then a short drive to the cloud forest of the 80-acre Macuilteptl Park. The park encompasses a volcano that is the highest point and geographic center of Xalapa, the capital city of Veracruz. This beautiful, clean, and well-used (by walkers, joggers, families etc) park, has a series of wide "trails" (wide enough for a car), that gradually wind up to the crater and the top of the park. Our target bird of the day was the **Bearded Wood-Partridge**, so we walked as directly as possible to the lush crater, with only a few stops on the way to rest and watch some birds. En route we saw **Blue Mockingbird**, **Wedge-tailed Sabrewing**, **Berylline** and **Azure-crowned Hummingbirds** (*below*). Once in the crater I played the call of the wood-partridge and one quickly responded a short distance away on the other side of the crater. We walked closer, about half way towards the bird, but it stopped calling. Eventually Jim heard low calls behind us and we walked back up the trail and eventually we had the bird located on the upper edge of the trail, at times less than 20 or 30 feet away. We carefully scanned for the bird, but we could not locate it in the thick vegetation. Later we moved to the higher trail, to a spot above the bird, but still no sound or sighting. Although not seen, we enjoyed hearing the calls of this secretive bird, and we enjoyed our morning

walk in this wonderful park. Some of the great birds that were seen included White-tipped Dove, brilliant scope views of Blue-crowned Motmot, Olive-sided Flycatcher and Western Wood-Pewee, close together for a great comparison, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Black-headed Saltator and we picked out (thanks Jim)





Acadian and Hammond's Flycatcher. We eventually walked to another spot where we have also had the wood-partridge. We quickly heard Chestnut-capped Brush-Finches calling and they came in to our imitations and were seen well by several in the group - a nice comparison to the Plain-breasted subspecies of the Los Tuxtlas area seen only yesterday. At the large water tank, which has some leaks where birds come to bathe and drink, there was a MacGillivray's Warbler, Rusty Sparrow, more saltators, a Cordilleran Flycatcher perched in the open, and the colorful Green Jay. Other migrant birds for the day were Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Blue-headed Vireo, Ovenbird, Canada, Tennessee, Nashville, Yellow,

Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Black-throated Green, Townsend's, Black-and-White, Wilson's Warblers, and American Redstart.

After a wonderful lunch of roasted chicken, Mexican style, we drove a short distance, dropping in elevation to a very different habitat consisting of dry thorn forest and open grasslands. Our target was the **Mexican Sheartail**, an endemic hummingbird found only here in central Veracruz, as well as in the northern Yucatan Peninsula. We hiked a short way on a couple of dirt roads and saw some new birds, including Blue-black Grassquit and Gray-crowned Yellowthroat. There was a very low-flying group of White-collared Swifts along with a Bat Falcon in full flight. Botteri's Sparrow, which is uncommon in the region was a good find, and we got to see the endemic *rufinucha* subspecies of Rufous-naped Wren. We expect this to be soon split as a separate species, and are calling it "**Veracruz**" Wren.

As we were driving out, slightly disappointed in not seeing the sheartail, Scott saw a hummingbird in a flower patch, and we quickly jumped out of the van and spotted a female **Mexican Sheartail**. Scott, Rick, and Janice got good looks from the van, and also briefly saw a male and his flaming pink gorget. Several more of the group spotted the female, both feeding and then perched. The female then flew off and did not return. Since not everyone saw the bird, and as the site was only a short drive from the conference hotel, we decided to try again a couple of days. So, on Tuesday afternoon we hopped into taxis, came back, and sure enough the female was on her same perch. She flew off but returned a short while later and everyone was happy to get good looks this time.

We ended our tour on Sunday afternoon, in time to register for the ABA conference. We had an exceptionally good group of happy birders, and bug-watchers (especially Rick), who enjoyed Veracruz's diversity of birds and habitats creating a fun and friendly atmosphere.

Thanks for a great trip!

Robert Straub, Xalapa, Veracruz