



VERACRUZ, MEXICO

"The River of Raptors"

September 26 – October 7, 2010

Leader: Robert Straub

**Trip report written by Robert Straub
Photos by Robert Straub**

Sunday, September 26, 2010 / Pre-trip - Afternoon at Chichi

Misha and Peter flew in from Australia and arrived in Veracruz a full day before the start of the tour. They enjoyed a restful evening and morning, before I picked them up at their beachside hotel at 1:30 pm. We drove north along the scenic coastline, picking up a few birds on the beach along the way such as Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, and Laughing Gull, adding to several species Misha and Peter had seen in the morning by their hotel.

We arrived in Cardel at the Hotel Bienvenido for a quick check-in. The morning rains had subsided, the temperature was rising and thermals were forming; since it was a little late for hawks at the hotel, we moved inland towards Chichicaxtle and Pronatura's second hawk watch site. En route, we found our first group of raptors - about 20-30 Mississippi Kites, and several Broad-winged Hawks, all moving south.

We then moved on to Chichi and the observation tower where we had more of both species in several nice groups. We found some nice local birds, most new for Misha and Peter, who were birding for the first time in Mexico, as well as both Green and Black Iguanas. A Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (*r*) was working the brush hunting for unsuspecting prey. Yellow Warblers were common and a colorful Ruddy Ground-Dove pair flew through. A male Buff-bellied Hummingbird perched by the tower for several minutes, a lovely treat for the visitors. After the hawk show slowed, we moved on to Rio Escondido, a site of grassland and mixed forest. Soon we had flocks of birds out sunning themselves, including perhaps more Blue-black Grassquits than I had ever seen before in one spot.





A few Gray-crowned Yellowthroats popped up, giving us good looks for this usually shy species. “Veracruz” Rufous-naped Wrens (I) were common, as well as Varied Buntings, both with very local breeding populations. A Laughing Falcon was calling close by, but not to be seen. A Roadside Hawk perched, called several times, and then flew off. Other attractive birds included great looks at male and female Common Ground-Doves, a pretty male White-collared Seedeater, a sharp Yellow-throated Warbler, and large groups of Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Orchard Orioles.

We enjoyed a very productive afternoon, with 62 species in about 4 hours of birding!

Monday, September 27, 2010 / Day 1 - Reigning Migrants

We began our morning with a tour of Johnny Angel Beach, my favorite rainy day site. We climbed to the second floor of the beach hotel there, and with shelter and scenic views, we enjoyed some nice birding. The river held a nice group of Black-necked Stilts and a couple of Greater Yellowlegs. We then moved to a new “palapa” or thatched-roof hut for some great views of the beach and the Gulf of Mexico.



This tropical depression was bringing in many terns from offshore including hundreds of Black Terns, along with many Gull-billed, several Least -a bit late for them- and Royal Terns. Many migrants were also pushed onto shore, including a steady stream of Green Herons. We saw a beautiful male Mourning Warbler, a Least and a Trail’s Flycatcher, and a Black-and-White Warbler. On the drive out we spotted a resting group of perched, and wet, Purple Martins.

After our productive morning, we moved up the coast to La Mancha for some additional sheltered birding as the rains persisted. At the mouth of the lagoon we picked out a small group of Least Sandpipers, as well as Semipalmated Plovers, many Sandwich Terns, and Magnificent Frigatebirds overhead. After lunch the rains finally slowed, and a northern wind picked up. Thousands of Dickcissels and White-winged Doves poured through with the tailwinds. We walked a bit and found a large group of White Ibis, and an Olive-sided Flycatcher.

As we were moving to our next site we stopped along the highway to scan a field. Here we experienced a “Veracruz” moment, where in the fall, if you stop nearly anywhere with vegetation, you will find migrants. We pished along the roadside and several warblers appeared: Magnolia, Yellow, a beautiful Prothonotary, and Common Yellowthroat. We moved on to El Salado, to a small marsh and series of ponds. The water level was high for waders, but we had many Northern Waterthrush, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Hooded Warbler, and Green Kingfisher; a Gray-necked Wood-Rail dashed across the track.



Near the end of the afternoon we drove the highway to Palmas de Abajo and found many Blue Grosbeaks, Montezuma Oropendola, Red-billed Pigeon, and an Amazon Kingfisher. A stop at a small pond produced a Least Grebe and several families of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, including three different groups with young ducklings. A group of passerines responded to our pishes, including Yellow-throated, abundant Yellows, and Black-and-White Warbler, as well as Blue-black Grassquit, and a Lineated Woodpecker. Overhead, thousands of Dickcissels continued to stream by; later we saw a few perched with a group of Blue Grosbeaks.

We were pleased with our efforts for the day, managing to stay dry in spite of the rain, and finding a diverse 103 species, including many spectacular migrants.

Tuesday, September 28, 2010 / Day 2 - Raptor Migration

After birding the last two days in the rain, our patience was hugely rewarded with an amazing day of migration. The rains had backed up the raptor flight and today 450,000 raptors were counted at the two Pronatura hawk watch sites. I estimate we saw perhaps two-thirds of them, if not most of them!



We started our day along the coast at Villa Rica, right where the mountains reach the sea, precisely where the funneled migration peaks. The skies were clear, with strong winds from the north, fueling wave after wave of White-winged Doves that zoomed by at high speed in groups of 100 or more. Dickcissels joined along. We found a family of Least Grebes in nearby wetlands, and later, a roosting Common Nighthawk (*below*) and then a lovely Common Black-Hawk flew by.



After a few hours we moved to Quiahuiztlan, a Totonac Indian burial site on a spectacular monolith overlooking the gulf. After birding the thorn-scrub forest of the foothills, we made our way to the ruins. At some point we looked to the north and were awed by the spectacle of thousands upon thousands of Broad-winged Hawks in very large kettles coming our way. We had the site to ourselves and laid on our backs to watch the hawks.



The kettles (*above*) were dynamic swarms of birds as they rose on thermals and utilized the winds to move south. We estimated perhaps 100,000 or more raptors flew by us in the hour we were there. The setting was quite amazing, in this ancient place where the Totonacs surely marveled at this same migration hundreds of years in the past.

We lunched in Cardel, then moved on to Chichicaxtle. The flight had slowed, and we watched a local Short-tailed Hawk go after bobwhites and eventually catch an iguana. There was a line of birds showing to the east, so we hopped back in the car and drove until we found the line at the quarry site, a reliable location for good migration. Here we enjoyed another amazing flight of mostly Broad-winged Hawks, with other raptors mixed in as well, including Osprey, Peregrine Falcon, American Kestrels, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks, and a good look at two Zone-tailed Hawks. The kettles were a bit lower this time, with many lines going on at the same time. Hawks soared and swirled from horizon to horizon. Multiple kettles were visible simultaneously, some massive from top to bottom, surely filled with thousands of bird each. We checked with a counter who had seen the same line of hawks and he estimated about 150,000 raptors had passed!



In the late afternoon we drove a short distance to Rio Escondido (*left*), entering from the east side. We added several new birds for our trip, including several lifers for Micha and Pete: Chuck Will's Widow, male and female Canivet's Emerald, Louisiana Waterthrush, and a large and noisy group of White-crowned Parrots flew over the canyon. A large group of migrating Wood Storks were a wonderful sighting for the end of the day.

Wednesday, September 29, 2010 / Day 3 - From the Coast to the Mountains

We started our morning at Playa Chalchihuecan, a coastal scrub site known for hummingbirds, resident and migrant raptors and passerines, and it did not disappoint.

We arrived at sunrise and started right away seeing many new local residents such as Altamira Oriole, Band-backed Wren, Social and Boat-billed Flycatchers and the other look-alike, Great Kiskadee. We continued on along the undulating and winding road, enjoying a pleasant walk, with many Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, Yellow-winged Tanagers, and a nice migrant warbler here and there. It was good to see that the local birds seemed to have fared well after Hurricane Karl.

The hurricane had damaged many of the trees, creating a number of broken treetops, which were good for perching raptors. These included Roadside Hawk and an immature Gray Hawk. We continued on to one of our hummingbird spots along the road. Here several flowers attracted a wonderful mix of butterflies, and where a favorite hummingbird flower, known locally as "Manzanita" (little apple, for its fruit), drew in several Buff-bellied Hummingbirds.



With a little patience we waited for a Mexican Sheartail (*above*), a Mexican endemic with a small isolated population in central Veracruz, to appear. It was not long before a beautiful male showed. Although back-lit, we had a lovely look at this bird as it perched nearby for quite a while.

A spectacular adult Gray Hawk landed close-by for great views. We then continued to the beach, unfortunately there was quite a bit of damage caused by the recent storms.



By late morning we had traveled back to Cardel and were on the hotel rooftop watching hawks. The flight was very good, a stellar day for most years, but hard to compare to yesterday's mangle boggling numbers - 473,944, numbers posted on www.hawkcount.org Pronatura Veracruz's 9th highest daily total in the last 10 years! After lunch we packed and moved on to Chichicaxtle for some afternoon hawk watching before heading into the mountains to Xalapa.

Following a short drive of about 40 minutes, but a climb of about 4,000 feet, we arrived in Xalapa with a couple of hours of light remaining. We visited the "new" 300-acre city park, "Parque Natura," on the eastern edge of town, which was rescued from new development!

The birding was very good, and we immediately saw new birds, different from what we had been seeing in the coastal plain for the last few days: Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Golden-crowned and Rufous-capped Warblers, Rusty Sparrow, and Yellow-throated Euphonias. On our lovely walk we reached a more forested section and added Spot-breasted Wren, a shy and hard-to-see tropical wren, and later on we first heard and then saw the Mexican endemic Bronze-winged Woodpecker (*right*), ending another very full day.



Thursday, September 30, 2010 / Day 4 - Xalapa



For our first full day in Xalapa, we started at the Macuilteptl Park, an old volcano, and now a wonderful 80-acre park of cloud forest habitat in the very center of the city. The birding here is always great, and we had a very productive morning. We were awed by a clear view of the glacier-topped Pico de Orizaba (*above*) - at over 18,000 feet it's the highest peak between Denali in Alaska and the Andes in South America!



Soon after arriving we saw a cooperative Azure-crowned Hummingbird and a Cordilleran Flycatcher (*left*), both residents of the park. Shortly thereafter we had a good look at a Blue-crowned Motmot, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, and Greater Pewee. A loud group of Green Jays showed off their spectacular colors. Walking along the wide paved path, making our way towards the crater, we added several migrant passerines, including Ovenbird, Blue-winged, Black-throated Green, Townsend's, Hermit, Black-and-White, Worm-eating, Hooded, and Canada Warblers. Resident warblers included Slate-throated Redstart, Golden-crowned, and Rufous-capped Warbler. It was a great warbler day! Our day list reflects the occurrence of east

and west migrants, as well as residents in the highlands; we have recorded 52 species of warbler in central Veracruz, perhaps more than another other place in the world! The morning's walk was capped off with Plain Chachalaca and good looks at both White-naped and Chestnut-capped Brush-Finches.



We then visited the lovely Xalapa Anthropology Museum, which covers the rich pre-Hispanic history of the state in a beautiful setting, and includes the 2,000 years old “Colossal” Totonac heads from the southern part of the state.



We visited hummingbird feeders at the home of Kim, a friend who originally hails from Minnesota. He greeted us warmly, with an offer of beer or coffee, and then tortilla chips, a bean dip, and homemade cheese. Kim’s beautiful porch overlooks a forested valley, and the hummingbirds were amazing. We had wonderfully close views of Azure-crowned Hummingbird, Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, and several spectacular male Violet Sabrewings (*right*) (the bird-of-the-day for both Peter and Micha), as well as Berylline Hummingbird. We also saw our first Acorn Woodpecker and nice scope views of White-crowned Parrots. Kim then called in Brown Jays for their daily tortilla scraps by imitating a Common Loon! The birds, setting and conversation were great, but all too soon, we had to depart for the Texolo Waterfall in Xico.

The striking Texolo waterfall (*right*) is a beautiful destination, made all the better by a bit of late afternoon birding. Here we compared flights and vocalizations of White-collared, Vaux’s, and Chestnut-collared Swifts, and had nice views of Montezuma Oropendola, and Common Bush-Tanager.

We added many new species to our list, and at the end of the day, both Micha and Peter had reached 100 life-birds since the start of the trip!



Friday, October 1, 2010 / Day 5 - The Highlands



Today was our high elevation exploration of the mountains above Xalapa; a big day for endemics. We traveled just a short distance, but climbed steeply to the pine-oak forests of La Joya, at about 6,000 feet elevation. After we and the birds warmed up, the birding was excellent, with just about everything being new for the trip.

Almost immediately we found a target Mexican endemic, a Bumblebee Hummingbird (*above*). It was a female, and after feeding on some low flowers, she settled on her nest to feed her two (large) youngsters! We lingered for a while at a respectable distance, taking photos. Eventually one of the young birds fed his/her sibling...a very odd behavior!

We continued our walk in the sun, tracking down resident birds such as Steller's Jay, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, Hutton's Vireo, "Black-eared" Nuthatch, Hepatic Tanager, Yellow-eyed Junco, and a nice look at Gray-breasted Wood-Wren. We also saw the familiar White-breasted Nuthatch, American Robin, and Brown Creeper. A large group of Gray Silky-Flycatchers (*right*) put on a great show in the sun.



At the far end of the site we found a productive patch of forest with richly vegetated understory. We had great views of the endemic Collared Towhee, followed by Russet Nightingale-Thrush, Rufous-capped Brush-Finch, and another Bumblebee Hummingbird. A wonderful array of warblers included Crescent-chested, Townsend's, Black-throated Green, Hermit, Olive, and Slate-throated Redstart. Our final bird in this area was a beautiful male Red Crossbill, perched on top of a high pine, for good looks in our scope. Peter and Micha were glad to see this Crossbill after unsuccessfully chasing it in Canada!



After a great lunch, we moved further uphill to Las Minas (*above*). Our first stop in the fields produced several open country birds such as Say's Phoebe, Vermillion Flycatcher, Western Bluebird, and a nice look at Buff-breasted Flycatcher. Farther down the road a striking Lark Sparrow sat up and posed for us. Under clear skies, we headed to the moist, forested canyon where Micha and Pete spotted another Mexican endemic, and major highlight, a Red Warbler. Amid spectacular canyon views we saw a resident Red-tailed Hawk soaring, and many Golden-browed Warblers.



For our last stop we moved across the dry Perote Valley to Los Humeros, a unique site in Veracruz with a habitat of Yucca and Maguey plants. Here we went to our regular hummingbird spot for great looks at White-eared, Magnificent, Blue-throated, and a female Lucifer, which is not often seen here. We also added Western Scrub Jay and Bewick's Wren, Horned Lark in the fields, and a darling little Rock Squirrel (*Spermophilus variegatus*).

It was a great day, enjoyed in spectacular settings!

Saturday, October 2, 2010 / Day 6 - The Highlands: Pt. 2

Since we were having such a good time in the Xalapa area, we decided to spend another day here enjoying the birds, the town, and the cooler weather.

On a beautiful sunny morning we met our transport and guides in the town of El Zapotal, to embark upon our outing to the Pixquiac River watershed, above Xalapa. We were to hike through mature cloud forest at about 2100 meters, ending at a lovely waterfall. A small community there has a budding tourism program that we were glad to support, and we were hoping to see several new birds that are not common at lower elevations.

Very quickly we had a singing Brown-backed Solitaire with nice looks in our scope, a favorite bird for the day. As we reached the forest, Mountain Trogon called and then appeared. The first trogon ever for Peter and Micha! Several other nice birds including Bumblebee Hummingbird, Tufted Flycatcher, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, many warblers, Common Bush-Tanager, and great looks at a group of Elegant Euphonias feeding on their favorite Mistletoe. We later heard Emerald Toucanet, but were not able to see them (until later in the trip).



I “fished” for a specialty bird or two in the area, and eventually a Bearded Wood-Partridge called only a few meters away! Very exciting. We quietly waited to see if the bird would appear, but it did not. We crept closer until only a few feet away, but the bird was not to be seen. As Peter and Micha led us even closer, the bird flushed rapidly, and alas, they only got a fleeting glimpse of the rear end of one of the most difficult endemic birds to see in Mexico.



Our walk led us to the spectacular Capote Falls (*left*), named after the huge-leaved plant found there. On our return hike we stopped in the sun and had great looks at swifts for comparison: White-collared, Vaux’s, and Chestnut-collared.

Back in town, we went to our guide’s house for a wonderful lunch of potato soup, local cheese, and a salad of freshly-picked watercress. We completed our day with a quick stop at the reserve of the Ecology Institute for a scouted Mottled Owl, but he was not at home. However, we did see several beautiful birds, such as Yellow-throated Euphonias, and Baltimore Orioles, among others in a nice flock.

Sunday, October 3, 2010 / Day 7 - Chavarrillo and Swift Roost

Today we visited Chavarrillo, a small town close to Xalapa and a bit lower in elevation. We were only a short distance from our cloud forest hike yesterday, but the drier climate, vegetation and birds were very different.



A male (*left*) and female Barred Antshrike put on quite a show in the morning's bird activity. Shortly thereafter Rufous-browed Peppershrike was seen close by. Other birds seen included Rufous-capped Warbler, Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, and Band-backed Wren.

We continued our hike along the trails and railroad tracks, with the

occasional town member and their well-behaved dogs tagging along. We added Gartered Trogon (*Trogon caligatus*), a new split, formerly known as Violaceous Trogon, now the South American species. We had another bird of taxonomic interest, the "Veracruz" (Rufous-naped) Wren, and with a bit of work, the very timid White-bellied Wren, which we all saw well. Yellow-billed Cacique was frequently calling, but here they are very shy, and were not to be seen. We also had great looks at Masked Tityra, Squirrel Cuckoo, Black-headed Saltator, a tiny female Canivet's Emerald to contrast with the male seen the other day at Rio Escondido, and a stunning Altamira Oriole (*right*) posing for us to enjoy.



After a short rest in the town of Cardel, followed by a bit of hawk watching at Chichicaxtle, we left for our next exciting new site, a White-collared Swift roost site, where we have seen thousands fly in to spend the night behind a lovely waterfall. The hike in was non-eventful, but the flood damage in this normally small creek was impressive.

When we arrived at the falls (*right*), a bit early, we settled in for the swift's arrival. At first, no swifts. We worried that perhaps due to the flooding, they were not going to arrive in big numbers as usual. But, no worries, as Peter and Micha often say, they soon arrived, little-by-little, and then began to stream in by the hundreds at sunset. They would arrive and swirl around above the falls for a few minutes, the early arrivals spending more time before making the plunge. Soon, they came in at very high speeds, in large groups, diving down from a height of perhaps 50-100 meters. At the last second, they banked hard and dove behind the falls into their impossibly small cracks in the rocks. It was hard to believe that so many swifts could fit in such a small place behind the falls. It was a spectacular show.



We hiked out just before dark, tired with the late night hour, but agreeing it was well worth it!

Monday, October 4, 2010 / Day 8 - El Mirador and La Antigua (Coffee, Cortes & the Coast)



Our visit to the El Mirador Ranch with our host Jorge Muller (*above*), is always one of the special days of our Veracruz tour, and today was no exception. From Cardel we drove up to 1100 meters and the Muller's family ranch and 19-century hacienda to be warmly greeted by Jorge. After some hot home-grown coffee, and a few birds including a very nice look at Audubon's Oriole, we soon loaded into his 1971 Volkswagen Safari. We headed into the organic shade coffee ranch, with wonderful old oaks and other trees that are used to shade the coffee, where the remnant mature forest and beautiful forested canyons, still thrive with native habitat.

The birds were wonderful, including Gartered Trogon (*right*), a perched pair of Bat Falcons, a calling Collared Forest-Falcon, amazing flocks of warblers, euphonias, and Red-legged Honeycreepers. We continued our hike through the coffee plantation and forest and saw a group of White-winged Tanagers, the male first spotted by Jorge. As we walked we found individual birds and mixed flocks, which included both Collared Aracari and Keel-billed Toucans (the first toucans for Micha and Pete!), White-tipped Dove, a lovely look at the miniscule Stripe-throated Hermit, Olivaceous and Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, and our first looks at White-breasted Wood-Wren (a change from the Gray-breasted in highlands).



After our lovely walk, we enjoyed a great lunch at the hacienda to equal the great birding. We were joined by Emege, Jorge's wife, and their giant Great Dane, Taiga, and also their tireless Belgian Shepherd. After delicious

tamales, a Mexican corn-pie of sorts, a few other nice dishes, beer, a lovely dessert and great coffee, we said our good-byes to all, and headed back down the mountain to Cardel in time for our boat trip to the La Antigua River.



We usually take the boat trip at the beginning of the tour, but water levels were too high at the time. Water levels have since dropped, so we made the trip. We felt mixed emotions, as we saw the destruction from the recent hurricane, with some huge trees having been knocked down in this normally shady town, where now few shade trees remained. Fortunately the house of Hernan Cortes faired well, with the large strangler fig trees having withstood the wind. With the rains after the hurricane the river here had risen many meters and actually went half-way up the riverside restaurant where we normally have dinner. Our boatman explained that he used streets as canals to rescue stranded residents. The staff of the Las Delicias Marinas restaurant was busy cleaning up and were glad to see us, as returning tourists. The boat ride turned out to be a success, and a nice economic plus for our boatman.



We went fairly quickly to the mouth of the river, watching several herons and egrets along the way. At the sandbar near the mouth we were greeted by large numbers of Brown Pelicans, Gull-billed, Royal, and Sandwich Terns, and a large group of Black Skimmers. We spotted several shorebirds including Long-billed Curlew, Whimbrel, Willet, and large numbers of Black-necked Stilt (*above*) and American Avocet. We then motored into the small side creek where we had several Amazon, Ringed, and Belted Kingfishers.

Our amazing day highlighted the diversity of Veracruz, where in a short distance we traveled from shade coffee at 1100 meters to sea level and a wonderful boat trip. We encountered toucans, honeycreepers, and woodcreepers, as well as kingfishers, egrets, and curlews, for a total of 103 species for the day!

Tuesday, October 5, 2010 / Day 9 - The Journey South

Oct 5th - This morning we made a special trip to see another Mexican endemic, the very local Sumichrast's Wren. This large wren is only found in forested areas with karst outcrops and caves in a very small area of Veracruz, Puebla, and Oaxaca. We drove from Cardel at sea level, to the town of Amatlan (near Córdoba), at about 1000 meters, and then to the hills just east of town. This is a well-known spot for the wren, among other nice birds.

We arrived early and hiked in a bit on the trail. We heard our target bird calling uphill, and walked closer to find it. It continued calling above the coffee plantation and into the edge of the forest. The vegetation was thick, and a machete would have come in handy, but we made our way closer, and sure enough when the karst became prominent, with all its caves and nooks and crannies, the Sumichrast's Wren appeared! It moved with ease and agility among the rocks, walking and jumping on vertical surfaces using its very strong legs. We enjoyed good looks at the bird, then headed back downhill to seek some of the other birds in the area, before the long drive to Catemaco. We had great looks at Fan-tailed Warbler, another endemic that favors this type of rocky and forested habitat. White-crowned Parrots, Red-billed Pigeon, and Montezuma Oropendolas were common, and we even saw a male Northern Cardinal on the way out.



After a couple of hours on the highway, we made our way to sea level again to Las Barrancas, one of our favorite sites, made up of natural savanna, seasonal wetlands, and scrub forest. We quickly found three of our target birds: Aplomado Falcon (*above left*), Double-striped Thick-knee (*above right*), both favorites for the group, and then Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, which is fairly common here and easily distinguished from Turkey Vulture with practice. Moving down the road, we added many herons and egrets, including abundant Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, and a handsome Limpkin. We stopped in a small forest patch to hear, then see, a Yellow-bellied Eleania. At several roadside wetlands and a large lagoon we saw many Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Northern Jacana, and other waterbirds.



Back on the highway, as we passed through the flood plain of local rivers, we had an immature Great Black-Hawk, another target bird of the area. This region of marsh and seasonal wetlands, near the small city of Lerdo de Tejada, had suffered from recent flooding associated with two hurricanes. What is normally wetlands was now a huge lake. The streets of the town were flooded, with water rising half-way up some of the houses and buildings. Some unlucky vehicles were floating into the wetlands. We were fortunate as the water level had subsided and the highway was open for us to traverse.

We made our way south towards Catemaco, and after a detour to avoid backed up tractor-trailer traffic, we arrived in Catemaco. En route, we stopped a few times on the scenic road for perched Red-lored Parrots and later Keel-billed Toucan and Bat Falcon. As we passed the UNAM biological Station at sunset (our site for the following morning), we looked for owls, and soon thereafter saw the local pair of Black-and-White Owls.

By nightfall we had covered many miles, but had a great day, with gorgeous scenery, amazing diversity, and 100 species tallied!

Wednesday, October 6, 2010 / Day 10 - Los Tuxtlas Mountains: Rainforest to Mangroves

Today, October 6, we were joined by Braulio Malega (*right center*), our local guide from Ruiz Cortines. We started our day with a lovely breakfast at our lakeside hotel, with grand views of Lake Catemaco, the surrounding hills, and great shows of Merlin and Bat Falcon hunting over the water!



We started our morning drive amid intense rain, worried that this may dampen the birding.

Fortunately, when we arrived at our first site, the UNAM Biological Station, the skies cleared and we did not have any rain for the rest of the day! We started birding just above the reserve where we had a good view of the area and a great place from which to



watch the many pairs of Red-crested Tanagers flying from their night-time roosts to their daytime feeding sites. As we looked up at the parrots, we also looked in the forest where we had trees full of Red-legged Honeycreepers (I had never seen so many together). An amazing group of birds were sunning on one of the tallest of the surrounding trees: Keel-billed Toucan (*above*), Montezuma Oropendola, Masked Tityra, and even Collared Aracari.

Continuing on the main road through the reserve we added several new species for the trip, including the Mexican endemic Long-tailed Sabrewing, as well as White-bellied Emerald, Black-headed Trogon, Gartered (formerly Violaceous) Trogon, and Golden-olive Woodpecker. We had nice looks at Black-crowned Tityra to match the Masked Tityra seen earlier, then Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Bright-rumped Attila, Rose-throated Becard, Red-crowned and Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, and the “Los Tuxtlas” variety of Black-headed Saltator.



A little after noon we moved back down the hill to the small town of Sontecomapan for lunch, we made a quick stop close to town to see the local pair of Barn Owls (*left*), who regularly perch in a palm tree. We named them “Tito” and “Alba”!

After lunch, we enjoyed an afternoon boat trip on the Sontecomapan Lagoon, led by our boatman Ismael, who pointed out a massive adult male Green Iguana on nearby vines. Ismael guided us out to the lagoon on the clear waters of a spring-fed creek leading from the docks. We headed straight for one of the distant mangrove-lined rivers, where we cruised slowly to search for local birds and look for

Sungrebe in the shadiest spots. We got nice looks at a pair of singing Yellow-tailed Orioles, and then an Amazon Kingfisher.



We crossed the lagoon to reach another shady, mangrove-lined river, where a striking Common Black Hawk (*left*) seemed to be guarding the river entrance to the river. Once inside the mangroves we quickly spotted a stunning adult Bare-throated Tiger-Heron (*below*). Further on we had Ringed and Green Kingfisher, and another Common Black Hawk, this time on the roots of the mangroves hunting crabs.



Out on the open water we saw Laughing Gulls, Neotropic Cormorant, and the occasional Osprey. We entered another small river and cruised along, hoping for Sungrebe, which we had not seen yet. Several migrant warblers were common along these rivers, including Hooded, Magnolia, and abundant Northern Waterthrush. At one particularly shady spot Peter excitedly motioned to the river's edge and said "Sungrebe!" Ismael skillfully maneuvered the boat for us to get a look. The Sungrebe, also skillful in the water, retreated to the farthest reaches of the water's edge, among the mangrove roots and branches, and was very difficult to spot. We eventually got nice looks at one of our favorite birds of the trip.

Thursday, October 7, 2010 / Day 11 - Cloud forest mega-endemics and the road home

We awoke to the last full day of the trip, October 7. After another lovely, lakeside breakfast, we visited one of our favorite sites, Ruiz Cortines. Up until recently, access was limited by a half day of hiking or impossibly difficult dirt roads. A new paved road now allows easy access into the cloud forest of the Los Tuxtlas region. Fortunately, the Biosphere Reserve is protecting the area with help from our guide, Braulio, and part of his community.

The cloud forest of the Los Tuxtlas Mountains is spectacularly beautiful and full of wonderful birds. It is perhaps most famous in the birding community for a species found only in this habitat, usually at higher elevations, and only found in this small mountain range: the Tuxtla Quail-Dove. As a quail-dove, it is also famously shy and can be hard to see. We began our search as soon as we reached the forest.



Braulio, an expert in finding the bird, started imitating the quail-dove. Of

course we could not avoid looking at other birds too, including Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner (*left*), Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, and many Common Bush-Tanager. A local subspecies of Chestnut-crested Brush-Finch sat up for great views, then an Emerald Toucanet flew across the road through the canopy and perched nearby. A group of Green Jays were calling and briefly seen, and we had several Golden-browed Warblers.



We reached the highest point in the road and decided to take one of the trails into the forest. Once inside, we quickly heard a distant quail-dove! We moved along the trail a little closer, but the bird stayed in place, or perhaps moved off a little further.... the call of a quail-dove can be deceiving. We stayed as still as possible, and Braulio continued calling for the bird, hoping that it would move in closer, but it stayed put. In the dense understory we had very little chance of spotting the bird, unless it moved in closer. We hesitated to leave the trail, because we would make way too much noise in the vegetation, and the bird would most likely move off. At some point one of us made a slight movement when directly behind us a quail-dove flushed, only a couple of meters away! We turned just in time to see the bird fly down the trail and behind a log, but not too far off. Braulio recognized the sound of the wing flap as a Tuxtla Quail-Dove! Essentially, while we were looking towards the first bird that was calling, this bird had quietly walked in to us from the other side, and we had no idea. We stayed still and quiet, and Braulio called again, and eventually the bird moved in front of the log and onto the trail, in full view! We enjoyed the bird for several moments, remaining as still as

possible. At some point, we tried for a photo, but the extra movement caused the quail-dove to walk off. We were all very satisfied with our “Mega Tic” as someone once put it!

It was still early, and our birding was far from over. We moved on past the village of Ruiz Cortines, to the forested hills on the other side of town. Our target here was to see if the local pair of Ornate Hawk-Eagle, and their youngster of the year, was still near the nest. As we made our way along the dirt road, and closer to the nest tree, we heard the birds calling. One of the adults was with the young bird, which was now fully grown and flying, but apparently still near the nest. These birds nest only once every two years, raising just one offspring per nest. We did not see the adult bird until it flew off, but we eventually spotted the perched and screaming youngster which was a spectacular white, with its impressive crest in full splendor. We positioned the scope for a nice view of the bird through the trees.



We continued our walk and spotted several other birds, including Yellowish Flycatcher and then a great look at a male Collared Trogon. Butterflies came out in the sunshine, including a surreal White Morpho (*above*) (*Morpho polyphemus luna*); Micha was able to get a nice photo as it flew by and perched. A “false” Coral Snake (*below*) had captured a salamander in a road puddle and we watched the struggle as the snake got a firm grip on its prey, then took it into the forest to feast upon!



After a spectacular lunch at Braulio's family's restaurant, including a delicious thick and rich hot drink made from a local root, we moved on to our final destination, Veracruz City. En route we had some extra time so we decided to see the impressive views of the massive rivers on the bridge to Tlacotalpan. Just after crossing the bridge Micha spotted a bird that had eluded Peter the other day - a Gray-necked Wood-Rail feeding in an odd spot in an old cattle yard, perhaps here due to the high water levels. We continued back on the highway and through the wetlands, enjoying decent, distant views of several Snail Kites cruising low over the water.



Our last bit of birding was back at Las Barrancas, just off the highway. We cruised along and had spectacular views of Scissor-tailed (*above*) and Fork-tailed Flycatchers, side-by-side. After diligent searching we found a female Purple Gallinule in the wetlands on its preferred reeds. We enjoyed nice views of Crested Caracaras and numerous aquatics including White-faced Ibis, to go with the huge numbers of White Ibis we had at the beginning of the trip. With the sun low in the afternoon sky, we had wonderful views of very close Double-striped Thick-knee and Limpkin (*below*), a wonderful end to our birding.



We arrived in the evening in Veracruz, sipped a satisfying beer on the main square, and chatted about the wonderful birds we had seen in the last 12 days, our amazing fortune with the weather, the utterly incredible flight of raptors (which warrants repeating: 470,000+ raptors on September 28), and a wonderful time birding, traveling and eating amazing food together with new friends. Micha and Peter caught an early flight the next morning, leaving with wonderful memories of a great experience in Veracruz.

Favorite birds for the trip:

Keel-billed Toucan, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Sungrebe, Red Warbler, Broad-winged Hawk, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Bumblebee Hummingbird.