

## Trip Report: México (Pacific coast of Oaxaca State)

June 22<sup>nd</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> 2017



This report summarises a four-day/three-night tour of coastal Oaxaca state with Eric Antonio Martínez (founder of Mexico-Birding, see <http://www.mexico-birding.com>) as my guide - as he had been during my 2013 trip to central Oaxaca. We based ourselves in the comfortable hotel Mision de los Arcos adjacent to the main square in the main resort town of Crucecita, Huatulco and travelled some 650 km by car between birding sites in three distinct habitats:

- Seasonally Dry Tropical Forest (SDTF) within the coastal Parque Nacional Huatulco adjacent to town;
- Thorn forest in the lowlands of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (some 220km to the east); and
- Semi-deciduous forest in the foothills of the Sierra Madre del Sur close to the shade-coffee growing town of Pluma Hidalgo (climbing to ~1550m ASL).



*Rose-bellied Bunting [Isthmus of Tehuantepec]*

Although June is the rainy season in coastal Oaxaca, we enjoyed hot and mainly dry daytime conditions at the lower elevations, with most of the rain falling at night. In contrast, conditions around Pluma Hidalgo started off overcast and misty, before persistent heavy rain from lunchtime onwards terminated our higher elevation birding for the day, by which time we had fortunately already found our key target species.

Thanks to Eric's knowledge of the area, his excellent ear for identifying distant bird calls, and his ability to mimic those calls, we located almost all of the possible endemics and regional specialties, including 19 Mexican endemics within a trip total of 97 species (including 32 lifers).



*Colima Pygmy-Owl [PN Huatulco]*

On day 1 and fresh from my morning flight, our birding commenced at noon along the Sendero Cruz del Monte trail that enters the Parque Nacional Huatulco on the edge of town. Despite the warm temperatures and bright sunshine it was surprisingly birdy, and over the next couple of hours we racked up a succession of lifers and endemics. A co-operative Colima Pygmy-Owl was an early success, seen delivering its abbreviated 2-note, then 3, then 4, then 5-note escalating call from next to the trail, whilst the more extended calls of unseen Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls were also heard.

Mimicking the Pygmy-Owl calls brought in two buntings (the stunning Orange-bellied Bunting and more subtly beautiful Blue Bunting), several hummingbirds (including a Green-Fronted Hummingbird - the Oaxaca-endemic Cinnamon-sided Hummingbird sub-species which Eric had never before seen at such a low altitude), aggressive wrens (Rufous-naped Wren and Banded Wren), and many pairs of the seemingly omnipresent White-lored Gnatcatcher. An Olive Sparrow was a noticeably different sub-species from that seen in the Yucatan peninsula, with its' browner, more pronounced head-stripes. Endemic Golden-cheeked Woodpeckers and Citreoline Trogons (with their bright beady eyes), were also seen, but refused to pose for photographs. Most conspicuous of all were the comical and hyperactive White-throated Magpie-Jays.

A mid-afternoon visit to the Mirador el Faro delivered spectacular coastal views, but no unusual birds. We invested the remainder of the afternoon outside the national park, exploring habitat along inland roads and around the periphery of a golf course.

The highlight was a dramatic Red-Breasted Chat that shone like a beacon in the dark under-storey of the thorn forest. All three of the possible Psittacidae were seen perched after a brief rain shower, including two endangered Lilac-crowned Parrots (better view desired) and good views of the more common Orange-fronted Parakeets and White-fronted Parrots. An entertaining family of White-throated Magpie-Jays was seen, including one parent offering what looked like a chicken drumstick bone to its offspring (needless to say, the 'gift' was quickly discarded rather than being eaten!). A cooperative Russet-crowned Motmot perched at eye level on the hillside above the golf course. The local sub-species of Northern Cardinal showed off its conspicuously large bright red crest, a crest more reminiscent of a Vermillion Cardinal than the Northern Cardinals we are used to seeing back home.



*Red-breasted Chat [Huatulco]*



*Blue Bunting [PN Huatulco]*



*White-lored Gnatcatcher [PN Huatulco]*



*Rufous-naped Wrens [Huatulco]*



*Orange-fronted Parakeet [Huatulco]*



*West Mexican Chachalaca [PN Huatulco]*



*White-throated Magpie-Jays exchanging a gift of a large bone [Huatulco]*



*PN Huatulco coastline viewed from the El Faro lookout*



*Aerial view across PN Huatulco towards the dramatic pacific coastline*



*Aerial view inland across PN Huatulco towards the coastal mountains, where Pluma Hidalgo lies within the clouds*

The next morning we made a 5am start to drive all the way to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in search of three key targets – the highly range restricted, endemic Cinnamon-tailed Sparrow and near-threatened Rose-Bellied (Rosita’s) Bunting – and the enigmatic Lesser Ground Cuckoo.

The strong, seasonal winds flowing from the Gulf of Mexico across the isthmus (“Tehuano” winds) and the local topography - with gaps in the mountains channelling the wind flow - combine to make the area near to the village of La Venta a major focus for wind farm development. We passed hundreds upon hundreds of huge windmills as we approached the key birding sites in the low thorn scrub at the base of the Sierra Tolistoque. Fortunately, June falls into the low wind summer season, so the birding conditions were calm, albeit rather hot. None of the windmills were rotating sufficiently to be generating material amounts of electricity, with almost all of them completely turned off.



*Prime bunting habitat along the foothills of the Sierra Tolistoque, near to La Venta [Isthmus of Tehuantepec]*





*Giant triffid-like alignment of a row of windmills looming over the landscape near to La Venta [Isthmus of Tehuantepec]*



*Thorn scrub and vast numbers of windmills near to La Venta [Isthmus of Tehuantepec]*

We got off to an auspicious start, finding Cinnamon-tailed Sparrows at the start of our walk. In addition to many of the same buntings, gnatcatchers etc. as seen the day before, we added Broad-billed Hummingbird (Mexico-endemic Doubleday's sub-species) and, after the threatening rain-clouds started to clear, we heard a Lesser Ground-Cuckoo lurking in the undergrowth. After a game of cat-and-mouse we eventually enjoyed good views of two individuals calling from mid-storey perches, however no photographs could be taken through the tangle of branches and leaves. Mid-morning, with two of the targets under our belt, we drove along some dirt roads towards a second, drier site. Along the way we enjoyed an added bonus of seeing multiple Lesser Roadrunners chasing grasshoppers, two different subspecies of Northern Bobwhite feeding along the roadside, and a Stripe-headed Sparrow. At the second site our efforts were eventually rewarded with close-up views of female, juvenile male and, finally, a sensational adult male Rose-bellied Bunting. Mission accomplished, we returned to Huatulco in time for some early evening birding along the main road (stunning close-ups of Orange-fronted Parakeets snacking on mangoes) and at the southern entrance to the Parque Nacional Huatulco. Most notable at the end of this long day was a close-up, eye-level view of an endemic West Mexican Chachalaca feasting on fresh green leaves.



*Cinnamon-tailed Sparrow [Isthmus of Tehuantepec]*



*Northern Bobwhite [Isthmus of Tehuantepec]*



*Rose-bellied Bunting (female) [Isthmus of Tehuantepec]*



*Orange-breasted Bunting [Isthmus of Tehuantepec]*

With heavy rain forecast for our final full day, it was with hope but some uncertainty that we headed off before dawn into the Sierra Madre del Sur foothills behind Huatulco in search of mid-elevation specialities. As it turned out, the birds were incredibly active and the temperatures very pleasant as we enjoyed a productive morning's birding, before steady rain led to the abandonment of birding for the afternoon.

Our first stop at ~750m ASL delivered Emerald Toucanet (Wagler's Toucanet sub-species), Golden Vireo, a female of the endangered and Oaxaca-endemic Blue-fronted Hummingbird, Audubon's Oriole (Dickey's Oriole sub-species), Fan-tailed Warbler, Rufous-backed Robin, and Black-headed Saltator. A Yellow-winged Cacique's nest was swinging as the inhabitants did their morning stretches before diving out to start their day. Roadside birding as we ascended further was excellent, with good views of Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, Rufous-capped Warblers, Happy Wrens, and Rusty Sparrows amongst many others. A Pale-billed Woodpecker was heard drumming, but went unseen. A Broad-winged Hawk hovering above the road was apparently an unusual sighting at this time of year.

A key stop at ~1,400m ASL (on the far-side of Pluma Hidalgo) delivered a family flock of gorgeous Red-headed Tanagers. After initially giving us the run around, they eventually proved both cooperative and highly photogenic as they gleaned insects from some eye-level tree limbs!



*Red-headed Tanager [above Pluma Hidalgo]*

As the mist gathered, the birding along an undulating dirt road at ~1,500m ASL was excellent – with the highlights being two perched male Blue-fronted Hummingbirds, and a Mexican Hermit (recently elevated by Clements from being a sub-species of Long-billed Hermit). A male Berryline Hummingbird, a flushed White-faced Quail-Dove, Blue Mockingbird and a Brown-backed Solitaire were seen along this same section of road. Golden-crowned Warbler's were common and Elegant Euphonia's lurked within a mistletoe-laden tree. A second Mexican Hermit was later seen flying across a clearing at our first site of the morning whilst we briefly checked the area out again in the rain as we retreated back down to Huatulco after lunch and a cup of the excellent, locally-grown coffee.



*Rufous-capped Warbler [below Pluma Hidalgo]*



*Blue-fronted Hummingbird [above Pluma Hidalgo]*



*Roadside habitat on the lower slopes below Pluma Hidalgo (at ca. 750m ASL)*



*Yellow-winged Cacique diving out of its nest in the early morning gloom [below Pluma Hidalgo]*



*Locals sheltering from the rain in the main square of the shade-coffee village of Pluma Hidalgo (ca 1400m ASL)*

For our final abbreviated morning of birding before my early afternoon departure, we explored a trail accessed via the southern entrance to the Parque Nacional Huatulco. My only lifer of the day was a Streak-backed Oriole, although we saw two more of the lovely Red-breasted Chats and were given the run-around by both a calling Collared Forest-Falcon and a Bright-rumped Attila - both of which went unseen.

Detailed bird counts for each specific site visited have been entered into ebird (a total of 9 separate reports), whilst a consolidated list of the species encountered in each of the three broad areas (Huatulco, Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and the Sierra Madre del Sur around Pluma Hidalgo) is included at the end of this trip report.

## 1. Bird Trip List<sup>1</sup>

Confirmed personal sightings only for DJS – excludes birds heard only unless otherwise indicated. As field guide I used [‘A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America’ by Steve Howell and Sophie Webb \(Oxford University Press, 1995\)](#) - which contained all of the species encountered. Some names have been updated since this guide was published, so birds in the trip list are identified as per ‘The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World’, Cornell, 2007 with updates through December 2010 (online version 6.5), unless otherwise specified.

Locations where species seen in sequence of travel:

**H** = Huatulco coastal lowlands, including thorn forest in the Parque Nacional Huatulco (including the Sendero Cruz del Monte and the southern trail entrance), El Faro coastal lookout, and habitat around the golf course and Rio Copalita. 12:00-19:15 June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 18:00-18:30 June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 07:00-09:30 June 25<sup>th</sup>. Includes ebird trip reports for near sea level sites: “PN Huatulco–Sendero Cruz del Monte”; “Mirador El Faro, Huatulco;” “Las Parotas Club De Golf Huatulco”; “Rio Copalita–Barra de Copalita”; “PN Huatulco - sendero entrada sur”. The weather was a mix of sunshine and clouds, with warm daytime temperatures of around 30°C.

**IoT** = Isthmus of Tehuantepec. 08:30-12:00 June 23<sup>rd</sup>. Includes ebird trip report for “Ojo de Agua Tolistoque” at ~50m ASL. The weather was initially cloudy and threatening rain, before clearing to bright sunshine and hot weather (> 30°C).

**P** = Pluma Hidalgo in the Sierra Madre del Sur. 07:00-12:00 June 24<sup>th</sup>. Includes ebird trip report for “Pluma Hidalgo (pueblo)”. Birding between ~750m and 1550m ASL. The weather was cloudy and increasingly misty through the morning with pleasant temperatures around 20°C, before birding was washed out from lunchtime onwards by steady and increasingly heavy rain.

**Black-bellied Whistling-Duck** *Dendrocygna autumnalis* [H]:

**West Mexican Chachalaca** *Ortalis poliocephala*  [H] \*:

**Northern Bobwhite** *Colinus virginianus harrisoni* and *C. virginianus coyolcos* [IoT] \*: (Near-threatened)

**Magnificent Frigatebird** *Fregata magnificens* [H]:

**Anhinga** *Anhinga anhinga* [H]:

**Brown Pelican** *Pelecanus occidentalis occidentalis* [H]:

**Snowy Egret** *Egretta thula brewsteri* [H]:

**Little Blue Heron** *Egretta caerulea* [H]:

**Green Heron** *Butorides virescens virescens* [IoT]:

**Black-crowned Night-Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax hoactli* [H]:

**Boat-billed Heron** *Cochlearius cochlearius ridgwayi* [H]:

**Black Vulture** *Coragyps atratus brasiliensis* [H; IoT; P]:

**Turkey Vulture** *Cathartes aura aura* [H; P]:

**Crane Hawk** *Geranospiza caerulescens nigra* [P]:

**Roadside Hawk** *Buteo magnirostris griseocauda* [IoT; H]:

**Gray Hawk** *Buteo nitidus plagiatus* [H]:

**Broad-winged Hawk** *Buteo platypterus platypterus* [P] \*:

**Inca Dove** *Columbina inca* [H; IoT; P]:

**White-tipped Dove** *Leptotila verreauxi fulviventris* [H; IoT]:


**White-faced Quail-Dove** *Geotrygon albifacies* [P]:

**Groove-billed Ani** *Crotophaga sulcirostris* [H; IoT]:

**Lesser Ground-Cuckoo** *Morococcyx erythropygus mexicanus* [IoT]:

**Lesser Roadrunner** *Geococcyx velox* [IoT] \*:

---

<sup>1</sup> First sighting ever for DJS;  = México endemic species; \* = photo available



**Colima Pygmy-Owl** *Glaucidium palmarum palmarum* **E** [H] \*:

**Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl** *Glaucidium brasilianum cactorum* [H; IoT; P] **heard only**:

**White-collared Swift** *Streptoprocne zonaris mexicana* [H; P]:

**Mexican Hermit** *Phaethornis mexicanus* **E** [P]: Recent split by Clements from **Long-billed Hermit** (*P. longirostris*)

**Broad-billed Hummingbird** *Cynanthus latirostris doubledayi* [IoT; H] \*:

**Blue-capped Hummingbird** *Eupherusa cyanophrys* **E** [P] \*: (Endangered)

**Berylline Hummingbird** *Amazilia beryllina beryllina* **E** [P] \*:

**Cinnamon Hummingbird** *Amazilia rutila rutila* [H] \*:

**Green-fronted Hummingbird** *Amazilia viridifrons wagneri* **E** [H] \*:

**Citreoline Trogon** *Trogon citreolus sumichrasti* **E** [H; P]:

**Collared Trogon** *Trogon collaris puella* [P] **heard only**:

**Russet-crowned Motmot** *Momotus mexicanus saturatus* [H; IoT] \*:

**Emerald Toucanet** *Aulacorhynchus prasinus wagleri* [P]:

**Golden-cheeked Woodpecker** *Melanerpes chrysogenys flavinuchus* **E** [H]:

**Golden-fronted Woodpecker** *Melanerpes aurifrons polygrammus* [IoT]:

**Pale-billed Woodpecker** *Campephilus guatemalensis nelsoni* [P] **heard only**:

**Collared Forest-Falcon** *Micrastur semitorquatus naso* [H] **heard only**:

**Crested Caracara** *Caracara cheriway audubonii* [IoT]:

**Lilac-crowned Parrot** *Amazona finschi* **E** [H]: (Endangered)

**White-fronted Parrot** *Amazona albifrons albifrons* [H] \*:

**Orange-fronted Parakeet** *Aratinga canicularis eburnirostrum* [H] \*:

**Ruddy Foliage-Gleaner** *Automolus rubiginosus guerrerensis* [P] **heard only**:

**Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet** *Camptostoma imberbe* [H]:

**Bright-rumped Attila** *Attila spadiceus pacificus* [H] **heard only**:

**Dusky-capped Flycatcher** *Myiarchus tuberculifer manens* [IoT; P] \*:

**Nutting's Flycatcher** *Myiarchus nuttingi inquietus* [H; IoT] \* :

**Brown-crested Flycatcher** *Myiarchus tyrannulus magister* [H; IoT] \*:

**Great Kiskadee** *Pitangus sulphuratus derbianus* [H; IoT]:

**Boat-billed Flycatcher** *Megarynchus pitangua mexicanus* [P]:

**Social Flycatcher** *Myiozetetes similis hesperis* [H; P] :

**Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher** *Myiodynastes luteiventris* [H; P]:

**Tropical Kingbird** *Tyrannus melancholicus satrapa* [IoT]:

**Masked Tityra** *Tityra semifasciata griseiceps* [P]:

**Golden Vireo** *Vireo hypochryseus hypochryseus* **E** [P]:

**Yellow-green Vireo** *Vireo flavoviridis flavoviridis* [H; P] \*:

**White-throated Magpie-Jay** *Calocitta formosa formosa* [H; IoT; P] \*:

**Green Jay** *Cyanocorax yncas vividus* [P]:

**Gray-breasted Martin** *Progne chalybea warneri* [H]:

**Rufous-naped Wren** *Campylorhynchus rufinucha humilis* [H] \*:

**Happy Wren** *Pheugopedius felix felix* **E** [H; P] \*:

**Banded Wren** *Thryophilus pleurostictus oaxacae* [H; IoT] \*:

**Gray-breasted Wood-Wren** *Henicorhina leucophrys mexicana* [P]:

**White-lored Gnatcatcher** *Polioptila albiloris vanrossemi* [H; IoT] \*:

**Brown-backed Solitaire** *Myadestes occidentalis deignani* [P]:

**Clay-colored Thrush** *Turdus grayi grayi* [P]:

**White-throated Thrush** *Turdus assimilis lygrus* [P]:

**Rufous-backed Robin** *Turdus rufopalliatus rufopalliatus* **E** [H; P]:

**Blue Mockingbird** *Melanotis caerulescens caerulescens* **E** [P]:

**Fan-tailed Warbler** *Euthlypis lachrymosa* [P] \*:

**Rufous-capped Warbler** *Basileuterus rufifrons dugesi* [P] \*:

**Golden-crowned Warbler** *Basileuterus culicivorus culicivorus* [P] \*:

**Red-legged Honeycreeper** *Cyanerpes cyaneus carneipes* [P] \*:

**Blue-black Grassquit** *Volatinia jacarina splendens* [H]:

**Black-headed Saltator** *Saltator atriceps peeti* [P]:

**Grayish Saltator** *Saltator coerulescens richardsoni* [P; H] **beard only**:

**Cinnamon-tailed Sparrow** *Peucaea sumichrasti* **E** [IoT] \*: (Near-threatened).

**Stripe-headed Sparrow** *Peucaea ruficauda lawrencii* [IoT]:

**Olive Sparrow** *Arremonops rufivirgatus sumichrasti* [H] \*:

**Rusty Sparrow** *Aimophila rufescens rufescens* [P]:

**Red-headed Tanager** *Piranga erythrocephala erythrocephala* **E** [P] \*:

**Red-crowned Ant-Tanager** *Habia rubica affinis* [P; H]:

**Northern Cardinal** *Cardinalis cardinalis carneus* [H]:

**Red-breasted Chat** *Granatellus venustus venustus* **E** [H] \*:

**Blue Bunting** *Cyanocompsa parellina indigotica* [H] \*:

**Rose-bellied Bunting** *Passerina rositae* **E** [IoT] \*: (Near-threatened).

**Orange-breasted Bunting** *Passerina leclancherii grandior* **E** [H; IoT] \*:

**Melodious Blackbird** *Dives dives* [H]:

**Great-tailed Grackle** *Quiscalus mexicanus mexicanus* [H; IoT]:

**Bronzed Cowbird** *Molothrus aeneus assimilis* [IoT]:

**Streak-backed Oriole** *Icterus pustulatus formosus* [H]:

**Altamira Oriole** *Icterus gularis gularis* [H; IoT; P]:

**Audubon's Oriole** *Icterus graduacauda dickeyae* [P]:

**Yellow-winged Caticue** *Cacicus melanicterus* **E** [H; IoT; P] \*:

**Elegant Euphonia** *Euphonia elegantissima elegantissima* [P]:

Total 97 confirmed species for the trip, of which 32 were lifers for DJS and 19 are considered to be Mexican endemics as per <http://avibase.bsc-eoc.org>