

Trip Report: México (Yucatan and Quintana Roo States)

May 17th – 21st 2017



This report summarises a four night, self-guided tour of northern and eastern Yucatan peninsula with Emma, criss-crossing back and forth between Quintana Roo and Yucatan States. We covered 1400+ km on the excellent and largely very quiet roads, dined on spectacular regional and international food in Mérida and Tulum, swam in the lovely Caribbean waters at Tulum and in three distinctly different fresh water cenotes, visited five hugely impressive Mayan archaeological sites (also the venues for the majority of my birding), and enjoyed a taster of lowland forests on the northern tip of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. A plus of visiting outside the winter high season was the lack of crowds at the Mayan sites (few visitors at Uxmal, Kabáh, and Dzibilchaltún, no one other than the caretaker at Muyil when it opened!) – with the notable exception of Tulum, which was heaving with thousands of visitors by the time we arrived mid-morning.



View through the roof of Cenote Samulá [at Dzitnup, near to Valladolid, Yucatan]

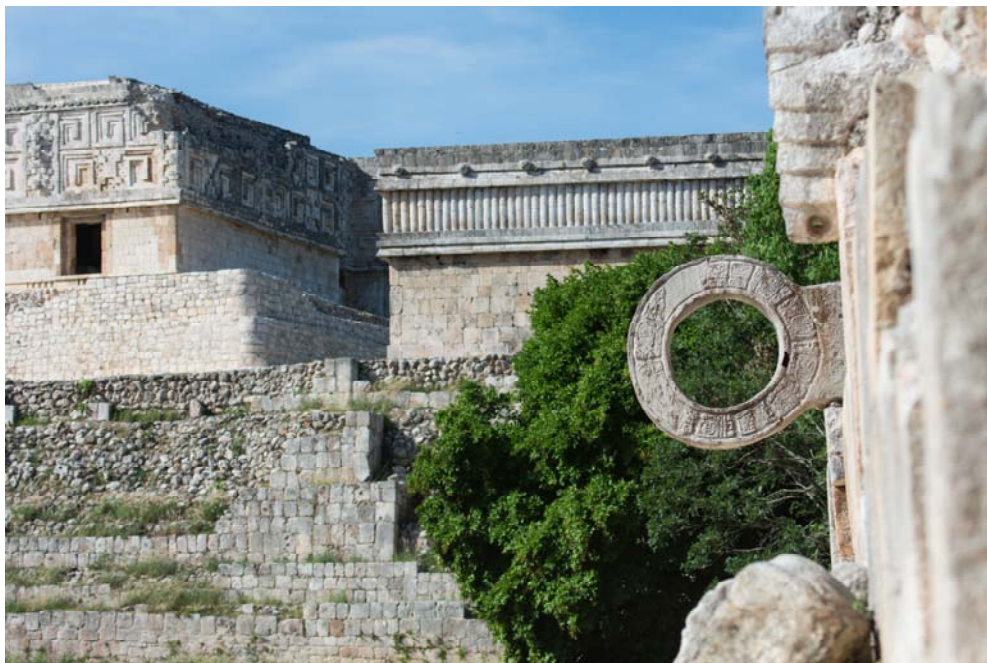
Despite the hot weather (over 38°C in the Mérida area), my dawn starts and good access to quality habitat in the archaeological sites delivered a trip total of 68 species (including 16 'lifers') and most of my target species. Evidence of breeding birds was everywhere – with many singing males, nests being built, and parents attending to juveniles both in and out of the nest.

Birding highlights included:

- Black-throated Bobwhite and Lesser Roadrunner seen near to the Dzibilchaltún ruins, and a Thicket Tinamou that crossed the access road to the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. Both encounters illustrate how much luck plays into a successful birding trip – the only reason I was at those fall-back locations was because the access to the respective nearby Mayan ruins was closed until 8am (despite what I had read on the internet suggesting earlier access to the grounds would be possible), so at the last minute I had to drive around and find somewhere else that looked to have birding potential during the golden dawn hours.
- Turquoise-browed Motmots calling and flying around whilst flocks of Cave Swallows swirled above us as we swam in the open air Cenote Yokdzonot.
- A confiding male Mexican Sheartail located during an end-of-day visit to the extremely hot and windy Progreso coastal area – this was the only Mexican endemic seen, reflecting the fact that many of the other specialities encountered are also found in neighbouring countries to the south of the peninsula.
- A group of Magnificent Frigatebirds playing catch with a fish along the shoreline near to Tulum.



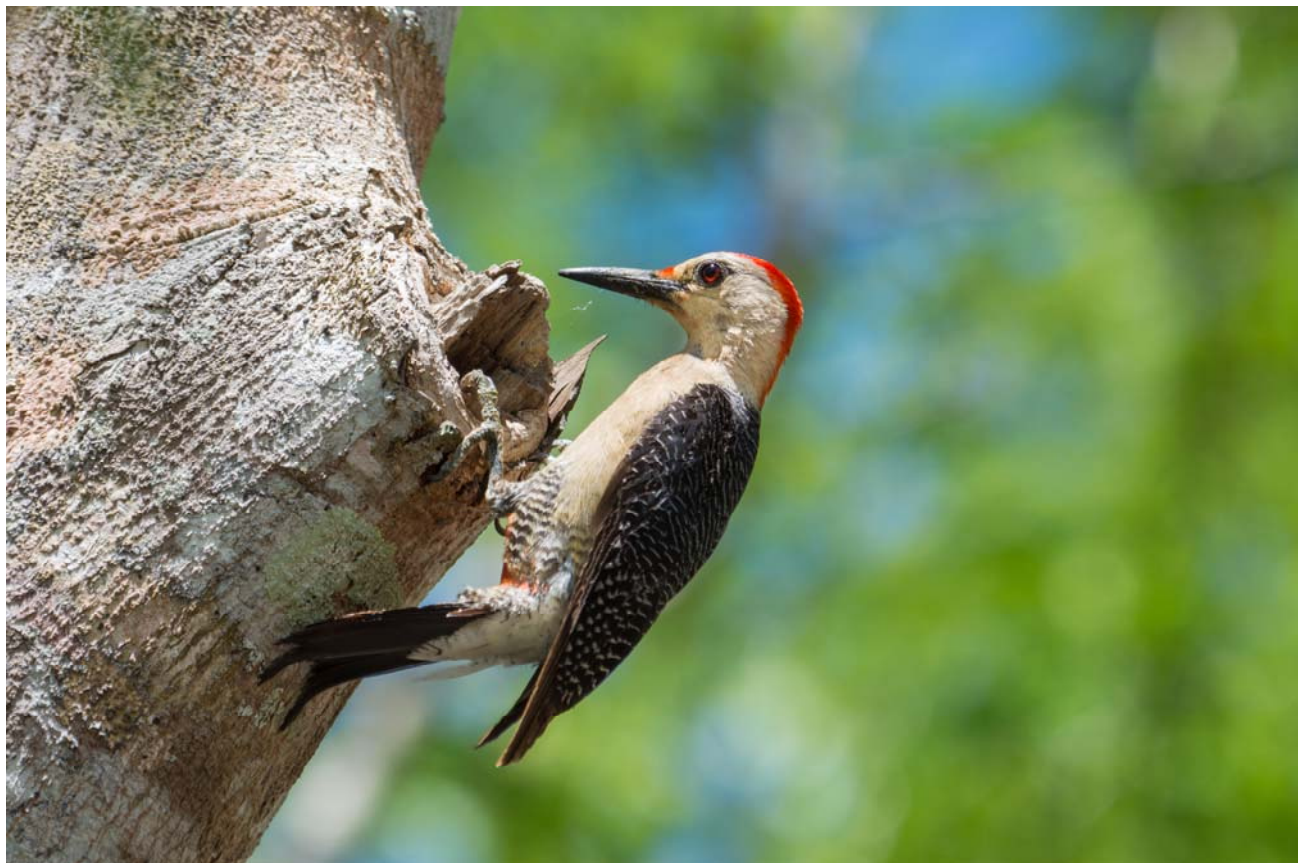
View from the Great Pyramid towards the Pyramid of the Magician, Uxmal Mayan site [south of Mérida, Yucatan]



The Ball Court and Governor's Palace at the Uxmal Mayan site



Brown-crested Flycatcher at nest hole [Uxmal]



Golden-fronted Woodpecker [Uxmal]



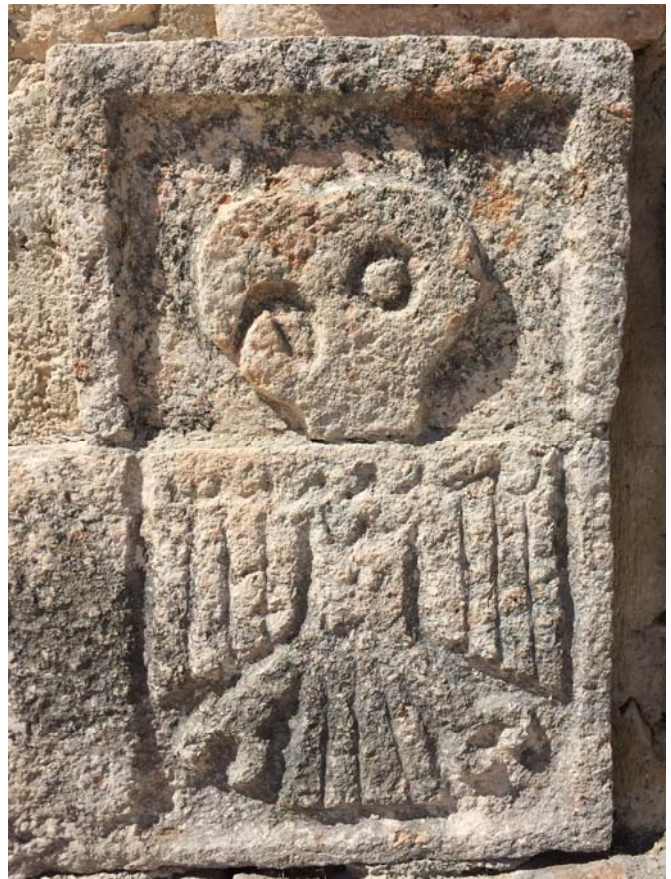
Masked Tityra (female) at nest hole [Uxmal]



Rose-throated Becard (female) building a nest; Yellow-faced Grassquit [both at Uxmal]



Cave Swallow nesting in the dark interior of the ruins at Kabáh



Statues at the Kabáh Mayan site [20km east of Uxmal]; Parrot (or Macaw?) carving [Great Pyramid, Uxmal]



Mexican Sheartail [Progreso, north of Mérida]



Lesser Roadrunner [near to the Dzibilchaltún Mayan site]



Black-throated Bobwhites (female and male) [near to the Dzibilchaltún Mayan site]



Olive Sparrow [near to the Dzibilchaltún Mayan site]



Cenote Xlakah [Dzibilchaltún Mayan site, north of Mérida, Yucatan]



Swimming below Turquoise-browed Motmots and Cave Swallows [Cenote Yokdzonot, Yucatan]



Turquoise-browed Motmot [Cenote Yokdzonot, Yucatan]



Tulum Mayan site [Tulum, Quintana Roo]



Tulum Mayan site [Tulum, Quintana Roo]



Magnificent Frigatebirds playing with an unidentified fish that proved too large to eat [Tulum, Quintana Roo]



Yellow-olive Flycatcher with nest material at the Muyil Mayan site [near Tulum, Quintana Roo]



Yucatan Jay on the Sian Ka'an access road near to the Muyil Mayan site [near Tulum, Quintana Roo]

1. Bird Trip List¹

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).

Locations where species seen in sequence of travel:

SX = Cenotes Samula & X'Keken at Dzitnup, near to Valladolid, Yucatan. 16:00-17:00 May 17th.

U = Zona Arqueológica Uxmal, south of Mérida, Yucatan. Including hotel front grounds ~1km before the entry to the ruins. 07:30-12:00 May 18th.

K = Zona Arqueológica Kabáh, south of Mérida, Yucatan. 14:00-15:00 May 18th.

P = Progreso area along coastal road Carretera 27 towards Puente Telchac Puerto, north of Mérida, Yucatan. 17:30-19:30 May 18th.

D = Zona Arqueológica Dzibilchaltún (and thorn scrub along a new access road to the Chaactún development some 3km to the west), north of Mérida, Yucatan. 06:30-09:00 May 19th.

Y = Cenote Yokdzonot, east of Mérida, Yucatan. 13:00-14:30 May 19th.

T = Parque Nacional Tulum and Zona Arqueológica Tulum, Quintana Roo. 18:00-19:00 May 19th and 10:00-11:30 May 20th.

M = Zona Arqueológica Muyil (Chunyaxché) and Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, Quintana Roo. 06:30-09:00 May 20th.

Thicket Tinamou *Crypturellus cinnamomeus goldmani* [M] *: Shortly after dawn, one crossed the Sian Ka'an access road and a 'proof of life' quality photograph was taken before it mysteriously vanished into the open understorey. Another was heard calling from forest near to a police check-point as we headed west from Tulum.

Plain Chachalaca *Ortalis vetula pallidiventris* [D; M] *: Single in thorn scrub; several along the Sian Ka'an access road and in trees around the Muyil ruins.

Black-throated Bobwhite *Colinus nigrogularis persiccus* [D] *: At dawn a pair crossed the dirt road in front of the Chaactún development (~3km west of Dzibilchaltún), flew into a low tree and then across the road into thorn scrub where they disappeared from view. A few minutes later a covey of ~8 more seen brazenly walking along the verge further down the same traffic-less road.

American Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* [P]: ~16 seen with other water birds in shallow pools to the south of Highway 27, between Progreso and Telcha Puerto.

Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens* [T] *: Five females or juveniles seen late afternoon fishing along the beach outside our hotel, then 'playing aerial rugby' with a large fish that they had caught but were ultimately unable to swallow due to its size. This involved throwing the fish in the air and catching it, or letting it drop into the ocean and then re-fishing it.

Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis occidentalis* [P; M] ~8 flew along the beach north of Highway 27, between Progreso and Telcha Puerto. One was patrolling along the beach in front of our hotel at Tulum.

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias herodias* [P]: One seen with other water birds in shallow pools to the south of Highway 27, between Progreso and Telcha Puerto.

Snowy Egret *Egretta thula brewsteri* [P]: Several seen with other water birds in shallow pools to the south of Highway 27, between Progreso and Telcha Puerto.

Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus brasiliensis* [U] *: Many sitting atop the pyramids and other structure at Uxmal. No doubt common elsewhere as well, but I must have tuned them out as I have no specific field notes mentioning seeing them!

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura aura* [SX; U; K; D; Y; T]: Common across the Yucatan peninsula.

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus carolinensis* [M] *: One perched at dawn on a power post neat to Muyil.

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus mexicanus* [P]: Several seen with other water birds in shallow pools to the

¹ First sighting ever for DJS; **E** = México endemic species; * = photo available

south of Highway 27, between Progreso and Telcha Puerto.

Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus maximus* [T]: Two seen late afternoon, flying along the beach in front of our hotel at Tulum.

Ruddy Ground-Dove *Columbina talpacoti rufipennis* [SX; U]: Several pairs in dry open woodland.

White-winged Dove *Zenaida asiatica asiatica* [SX; U; D; Y; T] *: Common across the Yucatan peninsula. Several birds observed sitting on nests. A fledgling was seen waiting for its parents at the restaurant outside Uxmal.

Groove-billed Ani *Crotophaga sulcirostris* [U]: Seen early morning in open woodland around the front grounds of the hotel on the main road before the ruins.

Lesser Roadrunner *Geococcyx velox* [D] *: Early morning, one popped up onto a log on the edge of thorn scrub in front of the Chaactún development. It watched me for a few seconds, allowing for several photographs, before it scurried off into the thorn scrub.

Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium brasilianum ridgwayi* [U; D] *: Several calling and one seen in open woodland around the front grounds of the hotel on the main road before the Uxmal ruins. Several calling and one seen in trees on the edge of thorn scrub in front of the Chaactún development.

Mexican Sheartail *Doricha eliza* [E] [P] *: One male and one female seen attending a flowering bush alongside Highway 27 some 15km east of Progreso. The male was still defending his territory from a perch in an adjacent bush when I passed by again an hour later. All along Highway 27 the agave plants had black, dry seed pods and no flowers and I saw no other hummingbirds.

Black-headed Trogon *Trogon melanocephalus melanocephalus* [M] *: One seen calling shortly after dawn along the Sian Ka'an access road.

Gartered Trogon *Trogon caligatus braccatus* [M]: One inside the forest surrounding the Muyil ruins.

Turquoise-browed Motmot *Eumomota superciliosa superciliosa* [SX; U; D; Y; M] *: We must have seen 40 or more by the end of the trip! Common in open woodland at several sites, but especially numerous at the fabulous Cenote Yokdzonot. Their calls echoed around the cenote as we swam below and Emma saw up to 14 in one tree growing in the side of the cenote. According to the locals they return to the cenote each year during the hot/dry season.

Yucatan Woodpecker *Melanerpes pygmaeus rubricomus* [D]: One seen next to the Temple of the Seven Dolls (which is the most famous of the structures at this Mayan site). This proved to be the only woodpecker of the many, many seen which had the required yellow tufts around the base of the bill – and I was getting rather desperate after having expectantly checked out so many woodpeckers by this stage of the trip.

Golden-fronted Woodpecker *Melanerpes aurifrons dubius* [SX; U; D; Y; M] *: Widespread throughout the trip. The subspecies in this area has a red front, not a golden front!

White-fronted Parrot *Amazona albifrons nana* [K; M]: A small flock seen seeking relief from the searing heat in some large fruiting trees adjacent to the Kabáh ruins. A pair also at the Muyil ruins.

Olive-throated Parakeet *Aratinga nana astec* [M]: Flyby of a pair at the Muyil ruins.

Barred Antshrike *Thamnophilus doliatus intermedius* [M] **heard only**: Heard calling along the Sian Ka'an access road.

Ivory-billed Woodcreeper *Xiphorhynchus flavigaster yucatanensis* [M]: One seen in the grounds of the Muyil ruins.

Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet *Camptostoma imberbe* [M]: One seen in a very active mixed flock after a short, heavy early morning rain shower at the Muyil ruins.

Yellow-olive Flycatcher *Tolmomyias sulphureus cinereiceps* [U; M] *: Nest building at both the Uxmal and Muyil ruins.

Yucatan Flycatcher *Myiarchus yucatanensis yucatanensis* [SX; U; D]: Seen in open woodland, most notably at the Cenotes Samula & X'Keken.

Dusky-capped Flycatcher *Myiarchus tuberculifer manens* [U]: One seen in open woodland around the front grounds of the hotel on the main road before the Uxmal ruins.

Brown-crested Flycatcher *Myiarchus tyrannulus cooperi* [U; D] *: The most commonly seen myiarchus. A pair photographed attending a nest hole in a dead tree stump at the Uxmal ruins.

Great Kiskadee *Pitangus sulphuratus guatemalensis* [U; D; M]: Several in open woodland. Several active nests seen.

Boat-billed Flycatcher *Megarynchus pitangua mexicanus* [U; D; M]: Several in open woodland.

Social Flycatcher *Myiozetetes similis texensis* [U; D; M] *: Small family groups common at several sites.

Streaked Flycatcher *Myiodynastes maculatus insolens* [M]: One seen at the Muyil ruins.

Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher *Myiodynastes luteiventris* [D]: One seen in the same tree as the Yucatan Woodpecker next to the Temple of the Seven Dolls.

Piratic Flycatcher *Legatus leucophaeus variegates* [M]: One seen perched on the top of a tree at the Muyil ruins.

Tropical Kingbird *Tyrannus melancholicus satrapa* [U; K; D; Y; M]: Widespread.

Couch's Kingbird *Tyrannus couchii* [D; Y; M]: Visually indistinguishable in the field from Tropical Kingbird (?), but with a distinctly different voice.

Black-crowned Tityra *Tityra inquisitor fraserii* [U] *: One seen early morning in open woodland around the front grounds of the hotel on the main road before the Uxmal ruins. A pair in a large tree at the Uxmal ruins – alongside several Masked Tityra.

Masked Tityra *Tityra semifasciata deses* [U] *: Several pairs, including one attending a nest hole in a tree trunk.

Rose-throated Becard *Pachyrhamphus aglaiae yucatanensis* [SX; U; D; M] *: Widespread and common. Noisy pairs, and possibly juveniles, seen together on several occasions. Nest building activity at both Uxmal and Muyil.

Rufous-browed Peppershrike *Cyclarhis gujanensis yucatanensis* [D]: One seen in the same tree as the Yucatan Woodpecker next to the Temple of the Seven Dolls. Appeared much less brightly coloured than the subspecies with which I am more familiar in South America. According to hbw.com there are 22 subspecies recognized!

Lesser Greenlet *Hylophilus decurtatus decurtatus* [M]: Common and vocal in the trees around the ruins.

Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo olivaceus olivaceus* [M]: One seen – stronger face pattern than the Yellow-green Vireos.

Yellow-green Vireo *Vireo flavoviridis flavoviridis* [SX; U; M] *: Widespread - the commonly seen Vireo. Also has a red/brown eye, but a less bold face pattern than the Red-eyed Vireo, and is distinctly yellowish around the neck, flanks and under-tail.

Yucatan Vireo *Vireo magister magister* [M]: One identified amongst the very active post-rain morning flock in the Muyil grounds.

Brown Jay *Psilorhinus morio vociferous* [M] *: A loud and bold pair observed along the Sian Ka'an access road.

Green Jay *Cyanocorax yncas maya* [SX]: One seen on the approach road just before the Cenotes Samula & X'Keken.

Yucatan Jay *Cyanocorax yucatanicus yucatanicus* [SX; M; T] *: Large and stunning! Our first pair was fortuitously seen at a brief stop on the main cross-Yucatan highway as we departed from Cenotes Samula & X'Keken. Thereafter we enjoyed close up views along the Sian Ka'an access road and whilst walking to the Tulum ruins. Usually in groups of 2 to 4.

Cave Swallow *Petrochelidon fulva citata* [U; K; Y] *: Very large numbers nesting inside the ruins at Uxmal and Kabáh. Similarly large numbers nesting in the walls of the Cenote Yokdzonot, and occasionally taking to the wing to form a swirling mass of calling birds circling above the swimmers in the water.

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher *Poliottila caerulea Mexicana* [U]: Pair seen at the Uxmal ruins.

Clay-colored Thrush *Turdus grayi tamaulipensis* [SX; U; K; D; M] *: Widespread and common. The only thrush seen.

Tropical Mockingbird *Mimus gilvus leucophaeus* [SX; U; K]: Several seen.

Gray-headed Tanager *Eucometis penicillata pallida* [M] *: A pair seen in the understorey at the Muyil ruins.

Yellow-faced Grassquit *Tiaris olivaceus pusillus* [U] *: Several noisy males seen singing loudly at Uxmal.

Grayish Saltator *Saltator coerulescens yucatanensis* [U]: One seen early morning in open woodland around the front grounds of the hotel on the main road before the ruins.

Olive Sparrow *Arremonops rufivirgatus verticalis* [D] *: A pair seen feeding on the ground along a narrow trail in front of the Chaactún development. Responded to playback and gave excellent views perched in the thorn scrub.

Red-throated Ant-Tanager *Habia fuscicauda insularis* [M]: Shortly after dawn a pair was seen and heard buzzing loudly in the under-storey along the Sian Ka'an access road.

Melodious Blackbird *Dives dives* [SX; U; M] *: Widespread in small numbers.

Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus loweryi* [U; P; M; T]: Widespread.

Bronzed Cowbird *Molothrus aeneus aeneus* [U; D; M]: Widespread, often seen harassing orioles around their nests.

Black-cowled Oriole *Icterus prothemelas prothemelas* [SX; M] *: A couple of individuals seen, most notably around the Muyil ruins.

Yellow-tailed Oriole *Icterus mesomelas mesomelas* [T]: A pair seen in a palm at our hotel in Tulum.

Orange Oriole *Icterus auratus* [SX; U; K]: Smaller, and much less common, than the larger Altamira Oriole.

Altamira Oriole *Icterus gularis yucatanensis* [U; D; M] *: The most frequently observed oriole, with active nests seen at several locations.

Total 68 confirmed species for the trip, of which 16 were 'lifers' for DJS and one that is considered to be a Mexican endemic...