

Eastern Mexico – 23 November to 1 December 2002
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Opting for a different style of turkey, Bob Cecil, Jim Dinsmore, Jim Sinclair and I decided to spend our 2002 Thanksgiving break birding northeastern Mexico. Our plan was to bird several inland sites in the states of Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosi with a stop in coastal Tamaulipas on our way home. Other than unusually cool weather and two days of fog, the trip was uneventful weather-wise. Our trip list included a respectable 244 species and was fairly representative of this season and region. The following trip report provides more detail on our itinerary and birding highlights. A final note to readers - we sincerely appreciate the trip reports of birders who have visited Mexico, but are frustrated by those who use this information, often commercially, and never reciprocate. Those birders and tour leaders unwilling to share their birding information in a similar format are encouraged to stop reading now.

22 November (Friday)

Our plan called for us to rendezvous in Waco, Texas at around 10 p.m. I left my home in Mississippi at noon and arrived in Waco at 9:30 p.m., a few minutes behind Bob and the two Jim's, who were arriving from Iowa. After leaving a car at the Waco airport (free long-term parking) and piling all of our gear into my Honda Accord, we were off by 10:30 p.m.

23 November (Saturday)



We had smooth driving to Laredo and arrived there at 3:15 a.m. anticipating a quick border crossing. It was here that we encountered our only mishap of the trip. I had been careful to bring all the necessary paperwork for bringing my vehicle into Mexico, but had somehow managed to leave home without the necessary papers (birth certificate, passport, voter card)

necessary for me to personally enter Mexico! After trying unsuccessfully to bluff our way in, we were trying to figure out what to do next when luck intervened. While standing in line at the Mexican Customs counter, an English-speaking woman in the next line overheard our dilemma and offered a solution. She suggested we return to the U.S. side and obtain an affidavit of citizenship from an all-night notary whose business card she gave us. She had apparently encountered a similar problem a few hours earlier and somehow learned of this solution. So, we headed back to the U.S. side. Forty-five minutes and \$25 later, we were back at the border and crossed by 6 a.m. without mishap. What a fortuitous break!

We drove south from Nuevo Laredo, skirted the east edge of Monterrey, and arrived in Gomez Farias at 2:45 p.m. (390 miles from Laredo). We didn't stop for any birding

but did see several hundred Greater White-fronted Geese and a lone Sandhill Crane north of Monterrey, 3 Muscovy Ducks along Highway 85 just north of the turn to Gomez, and the “usual” Bat Falcon on the way up to Gomez. We also stopped at a roadside stand near Ciudad Victoria and bought a large bag of excellent oranges that lasted the entire trip. After all the driving, we relaxed for dinner at Bocatoma II, a small outdoor restaurant at the end of a winding gravel road south of Gomez Farias. How anyone regularly finds this place is beyond me, but the meal is worth it! We ordered a kilo of langostinos for appetizers, followed by fresh fish for dinner. And I mean fresh – we ordered the meal, watched a small boy catch the fish from a holding pond, and were eating them 20 minutes later. While waiting for the meal, we drank a couple of cervezas and took a stroll around the property. Bob and I had no more reached the edge of the lagoon when a female Sungrebe lazily swam across the channel right in front of us, affording us all great looks. We also enjoyed seeing Amazon Kingfisher, Linnated Woodpecker, and Gray-collared Becard. We spent the night at Hotel Posada in Gomez – nice rooms for about \$12 per person per night (phone: 831-232-6671, email: hotelposadacampestre@yahoo.com.mx). We were in bed by 7 p.m. (415 miles by car)

24 November (Sunday)

We spent today birding the Gomez Farias area between 7 a.m. and 2 p.m., mostly along the roads to Alta Cima. At dawn, we heard (but did not see) a Collared Forest-Falcon from our motel. Birds seen in this area included Zone-tailed Hawk, several Squirrel Cuckoos, Red-lored Parrot (one of the few times we saw parrots well enough to identify them!), Golden-olive (Bronze-winged) Woodpecker, Cassin’s Vireo, Rufous-



browed Peppershrike, and Crimson-collared Grosbeak. An interesting non-bird sighting involved a small leaf butterfly that we all studied at length. After a brief siesta in mid-afternoon, we headed back to Bocatoma II for a charter boat ride on the lagoon (about \$5 for 4 people for an hour). We spent about an hour cruising the lagoon and river in a motorboat with the operator, Jorge. It was a little cumbersome for birding, but we did see some nice scenery (deep blue pools and a small waterfall) and had looks at a Great Black-Hawk, a Blue-crowned Motmot (everyone but me), and an unidentified trogon. We enjoyed another dinner of fresh fish, langostinos, and cerveza before returning to Gomez for the night. We also learned of a second motel in Gomez that may be of interest to birders – Hostal Casa de Piedra (phone 834-316-6941, website is http://tourbymexico.com/elcielo_casadepiedra). Rooms were about \$40 per night and they have a good library of Mexican natural history books. (26 miles by car, 3 miles on foot)

25 November (Monday)



We spent this morning birding the Gomez Farias area again before heading south towards El Naranjo at noon. Between 7 a.m. and noon we slowly birded and drove the 9 km road from Gomez to El Cielo. There were a couple of rough spots along the first kilometer, but we found the road otherwise fine and easily passable by my Honda. Birding highlights included Thicket Tinamou

(heard only), Olivaceous and Ivory-billed woodcreepers, White-throated Thrush, Blue Mockingbird, and spectacular view of a male Elegant (Blue-hooded) Euphonia. At noon we headed south, stopping for pollo asado and cokes in Loma Alta (\$10.50 for the 4 of us). We arrived in El Naranjo at 3 p.m., checked in to the motel (Hotel De Valle, about \$15 per person per night), and birded locally from 3:30 to 6 p.m. The birding was good and we saw Muscovy Duck, Green Parakeet, Black Phoebe, White-winged Tanager, and Blue Bunting. Dinner consisted of street tacos and cerveza at a small stand near the motel – my favorite Mexican meal. (102 miles by car, 2 miles on foot)

26 November (Tuesday)

We spent today birding several locales in the mountains just west of El Naranjo and found the birding to be generally very slow. Birds were downright scarce, although we eventually found a couple of mixed-species flocks that were worth the wait. Along Highway 80 before El Sabinito, we found a cooperative Elegant Trogon and little else. On Maguey de Ote Road south of Highway 80 at kilometer 152 we found Blue-crowned Motmot, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Blue Mockingbird, White-winged Tanager, and Crimson-collared Grosbeak. Farther west along Highway 80, we stopped near the fire tower for a short hike and a lunch of kippers and triskets. Birding was very slow here, but we finally found a good flock that included Red-eyed Vireo, Crescent-chested and Townsend's warblers, Painted Redstart, and Hepatic Tanager. But certainly the most interesting sighting was an odd-looking critter we found crossing the road. It turned out to be a whip scorpion (see photo above). We again spent the night at Hotel De Valle in El Naranjo and enjoyed another dinner of street tacos and cerveza. (46 miles by car, 2 miles on foot)



27 November (Wednesday)



This was perhaps the best birding day of the trip, both in terms of species diversity (117) and rarities. The day dawned gray and foggy, and we encountered intermittent light drizzle throughout the day. We began by birding the gravel road near kilometer 152 until about 10 a.m. Unlike the previous day, we found the bird activity excellent. At one point, Jim S. heard

some distant parrots that didn't sound quite right. Well, after a few seconds of searching the foggy sky, we discovered why – they were macaws! Although they were quite distant, we thoroughly enjoyed seeing and hearing a flock of 34 Military Macaws. Other highlights here included 2 female Barred Antshrikes, 3 Rufous-browed Peppershrikes, Carolina Wren, 2 Blue Mockingbirds, and several active flocks of passerines studied at close range. We then retraced our way towards El Naranjo, stopping briefly at a wetland east of town where we saw Muscovy Ducks, 2 “Mexican” Mallards, and a male Altamira Yellowthroat. Then it was south towards Xilitla. We saw 3 Bat Falcons en route and saw a Common Loon on an unnamed lake just north of Ciudad Valles. We then found a fabulous wetland along Highway 85 just south of Rio Tampaon, where we birded from 1 to 3:30 p.m. Among the abundant waterbirds we saw 2 Roseate Spoonbills, White Ibis, Canvasback, a male Snowy Plover, and an American Pipit. But all of this was overshadowed by a juvenile Surf Scoter! At times we could see this bird in the same scope view as the spoonbills, certainly an oddity for this part of the world. Farther south on Highway 85, we took a dirt road west between kilometers 350 and 351. Along this road we saw a male Aplomado Falcon, Scrub Euphonia, and Yellow-winged and Blue-gray tanagers. We then returned to Highway 85 and made a beeline for Xilitla, where we spent the night in El Castillo (about \$25 per person per night). That evening we enjoyed a traditional Mexican dinner on the square just above the hotel. Incredibly, we found an Internet café near the hotel and were able to contact family and birders at home (cost was about \$1 for an hour on-line). (168 miles by car, 1 mile on foot)

28 November (Thursday)

When we awoke this morning, we found the surrounding mountains shrouded in fog. And although we couldn't enjoy the scenery, we did enjoy the spectacular show by 2 Bat Falcons as they chased White-collared Swifts above the motel! We spent the remainder of the day birding Las Pozas, a sculpture garden in an incredible surreal jungle-like setting. The weather was less than great and included fog, a light rain, and temperatures that hovered in the mid-50s all day after an early morning low of 44! Birding at Las Pozas was good and we found large flocks of Red-billed Pigeons, Emerald Toucanet, Magnificent Hummingbird, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Slate-colored Solitaire, Common Bush-Tanager, an incredible flock of 62+ Yellow-winged Tanagers, and Montezuma Oropendola. A little birding just east of town produced a large flock of Green Parakeets

and Amazon and Ringed kingfishers. We again spent the night at El Castillo and enjoyed an excellent dinner at a small Italian restaurant on the town square. (29 miles by car, 2 miles on foot)



29 November (Friday)

We birded at Las Pozas from 7 a.m. until 1 p.m. under much better weather conditions than the previous day. We were delayed a bit getting in when a suspicious-looking man demanded payment from us (there is a \$2 per person per day entrance fee), but refused to give us a receipt. So we birded the road and waited until 9:30 a.m. when the regular work crew arrived. Highlights included Zone-tailed Hawk, Bat Falcon, Collared Forest-Falcon (heard only), many Squirrel Cuckoos, Smoky-brown Woodpecker, Emerald Toucanet, a spectacular Violaceous Trogon, Rose-throated Becard, Slate-colored Solitaire, and Common Bush-Tanager. After Las Pozas, we retraced our path northward towards Ciudad Valles. We again stopped at the wetland south of Rio Tampaon where we saw many of the birds seen here two days earlier, including the juvenile Surf Scoter, a Semipalmated Plover, and a cooperative male Collared Plover. At Ciudad Valles, we turned east on Highway 70 and drove the short distance (~10 miles) to the Taninul resort where we spent the night (\$15 per person). We birded the grounds in late afternoon and enjoyed great looks at several sleeping Boat-billed Herons. After dark we drove the roads hoping for a nightjar or one of several nocturnal mammal species, but all we found was a calling Mottled Owl. (68 miles by car, 2 miles on foot)

30 November (Saturday)



We departed Taninul resort at 5:30 a.m. and drove straight to La Pesca, arriving there at 11:30 a.m. On the way Jim S. spotted a pair of Eurasian Collared-Doves along Highway 180 on the north edge of Manuel. We spent all afternoon birding the vast lagoons near La Pesca and ocean watching from the jetty at the inlet east of town. Some of the many highlights included a subadult

Masked Booby resting on the beach, a fly-by juvenile Northern Gannet, hundreds of waders (13 species) including numerous Reddish Egrets, a single Ross's Goose in a small flock of Snow Geese, 16 species of shorebirds, Gull-billed and Common terns, and a

Linneated Woodpecker. We spent the night at Hotel Rivera del Rio in La Pesca at a cost of about \$50 per room. We found this motel adequate, but very noisy. We ate dinner at the hotel restaurant – fresh speckled sea trout and cerveza for about \$7 per person. (272 miles by car, 1 mile on foot)

1 December (Sunday)

We spent the early morning (7 to 9:30 a.m.) birding the lagoons and beach at La Pesca before heading for the border. Many of this morning's birds were repeats from yesterday, but we did see Clapper Rail, 5 more shorebird species including Whimbrel, Dunlin, and Wilson's Snipe, and 2 "Mangrove" Yellow Warblers. A quick attempt to find a Black Rail was unsuccessful. On our way north we found another pair of Eurasian Collared-Doves at kilometer 89 on Highway 97. We arrived in Reynosa at 1:10 p.m. and quickly turned in the vehicle permit. We encountered heavy traffic on the U.S. side, and it took us 1 hour and 15 minutes to pass through U.S. customs. We arrived in Waco at 10:30 p.m. after another 1 ½ to 2 hours of delays near San Antonio and Austin. Thus ended another fabulous birding trip to Mexico. (656 miles by car)

Additional comments on Gomez Farias:

With a little luck, you can get to Bocatoma II (not to be confused with Bocatoma, which is in the little town along the way) by following the signs. After you make the turnoff to Gomez from highway 85, watch for the signs at the first gravel road to the south, at the base of the escarpment. Bocatoma II is only open from Thursday through Sunday, although there is a little private park next to it, which provides access to the area – I presume there is a small fee to enter. If you want cerveza with your langostinos, bring your own – they normally do not serve it. BTW – langostinos are a local crustacean that looks like a crawfish/prawn hybrid. The fish is either tilapia or catfish. I didn't know how to order catfish – *pescado gato* did not work.

Gomez is much more accommodating to overnight visitors now. A few years ago, there was only one place with rooms, or so I was told – I could never find it. In addition to the two small hotels in town, there are the rooms at Alta Cima, and we learned from backpackers that there is another small hotel under construction at Alta Cima or one of the tiny towns nearby. There are also several people in Gomez who can take you past Alta Cima in high clearance trucks – pretty much impossible with the standard sedan. Obviously, eco-tourism is starting to have a place in the local economy.

--Bob Cecil

For additional information about this trip, contact Bob Cecil (wewarb@aol.com) or Stephen J. Dinsmore (sdinsmore@cfr.msstate.edu).

Birds seen on eastern Mexico
trip, 23 November-1 December
2002 (244 species)

Thicket Tinamou
Common Loon
Least Grebe
Pied-billed Grebe
Masked Booby
Northern Gannet
American White Pelican
Brown Pelican
Neotropic Cormorant
Double-crested Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Great Egret
Snowy Egret
Little Blue Heron
Tricolored Heron
Reddish Egret
Cattle Egret
Green Heron
Black-crowned Night-Heron
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
Boat-billed Heron
White Ibis
White-faced Ibis
Roseate Spoonbill
Wood Stork
Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture
Black-bellied Whistling-Duck
Greater White-fronted Goose
Snow Goose
Ross's Goose
Muscovy Duck
Gadwall
American Wigeon
(Mexican) Mallard
Blue-winged Teal
Northern Shoveler
Green-winged Teal
Canvasback
Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Surf Scoter
Osprey
White-tailed Kite
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Gray Hawk
Common Black-Hawk
Great Black-Hawk
Harris's Hawk
Roadside Hawk
Short-tailed Hawk
White-tailed Hawk
Zone-tailed Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Collared Forest-Falcon

Crested Caracara
American Kestrel
Aplomado Falcon
Bat Falcon
Plain Chachalaca
Northern Bobwhite
Clapper Rail
American Coot
Sungrebe
Sandhill Crane
Black-bellied Plover
Collared Plover
Snowy Plover
Semipalmated Plover
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Willet
Spotted Sandpiper
Whimbrel
Long-billed Curlew
Marbled Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper
Short-billed Dowitcher
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Forster's Tern
Black Skimmer
Rock Dove
Red-billed Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove
Common Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove
Green Parakeet
Military Macaw
Red-lore Parrot
Squirrel Cuckoo
Greater Roadrunner
Groove-billed Ani
Mottled Owl
White-collared Swift
Vaux's Swift

Wedge-tailed Sabrewing
Magnificent Hummingbird
Violaceous Trogon
Elegant Trogon
Blue-crowned Motmot
Ringed Kingfisher
Belted Kingfisher
Amazon Kingfisher
Green Kingfisher
Emerald Toucanet
Acorn Woodpecker
Golden-fronted Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Smoky-brown Woodpecker
Golden-olive (Bronze-winged)
Woodpecker
Linneated Woodpecker
Olivaceous Woodcreeper
Ivory-billed Woodcreeper
Barred Antshrike
Northern Beardless Tyrannulet
Tufted Flycatcher
Greater Pewee
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
Empidonax sp. (not Yell.-bell.)
Black Phoebe
Eastern Phoebe
Vermilion Flycatcher
Dusky-capped Flycatcher
Brown-crested Flycatcher
Great Kiskadee
Boat-billed Flycatcher
Social Flycatcher
Tropical Kingbird
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher
Gray-collared Becard
Rose-throated Becard
Masked Tityra
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo
Cassin's Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo
Red-eyed Vireo
Rufous-browed Peppershrike
Green Jay
Brown Jay
Tamaulipas Crow
Chihuahuan Raven
Common Raven
Tree Swallow
Mangrove Swallow
N. Rough-winged Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Barn Swallow
Black-crested Titmouse
Spot-breasted Wren
Carolina Wren
Bewick's Wren
House Wren
Sedge Wren

Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Eastern Bluebird
Brown-backed Solitaire
Slate-colored Solitaire
Clay-colored Robin
White-throated Thrush
Northern Mockingbird
Blue Mockingbird
American Pipit
Orange-crowned Warbler
Nashville Warbler
Crescent-chested Warbler
Northern Parula
Tropical Parula
“Mangrove” Yellow Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Townsend’s Warbler
Yellow-throated Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
Northern Waterthrush
Louisiana Waterthrush
Common Yellowthroat
Altamira Yellowthroat
Gray-crowned Yellowthroat
Wilson’s Warbler
Painted Redstart
Golden-crowned Warbler
Rufous-capped Warbler
Common Bush-Tanager
Hepatic Tanager
Summer Tanager
Flame-colored Tanager
White-winged Tanager
Blue-gray Tanager
Yellow-winged Tanager
Scrub Euphonia
Yellow-throated Euphonia
Elegant Euphonia
White-collared Seedeater
Olive Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Lincoln’s Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
Black-headed Saltator
Crimson-collared Grosbeak
Northern Cardinal
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Blue Bunting
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Melodious Blackbird
Brewer’s Blackbird
Great-tailed Grackle
Bronzed Cowbird
Brown-headed Cowbird
Hooded Oriole
Altamira Oriole
Audubon’s Oriole
Baltimore Oriole

Scott’s Oriole
Montezuma Oropendola
Lesser Goldfinch
House Sparrow