

# Veracruz, Mexico: River of Raptors | Trip Report

Sept. 25 – Oct. 5, 2019 | Written by Dave Mehlman



With guides Kashmir Wolf & Dave Mehlman, with participants Brenda, Cecelia, Kathleen, Mark, Rebecca





### **Wednesday, Sept. 25 Arrival in Veracruz**

Kathleen, Rebecca, and Dave arrived a day early and explored Veracruz City with Kashmir, learning a lot at the San Juan de Ulua fort and the city museum. Mark, Brenda, and Cecelia arrived in the afternoon and evening and were picked up by Kashmir and Dave (who dealt with a flat tire along the way to the airport). Everyone was transferred to our comfortable accommodations at the lovely (and historic) Hotel Mocambo in Boca del Río, Veracruz, where the early arrivals enjoyed a lovely dinner.

### **Thursday, Sept. 26 Morning Birding | Cempoala Archeological Site**

Despite the rigors of travel, everyone got up early and went for a short walk on the grounds of the Hotel Mocambo and along the adjacent beach. Despite the built-up area, it was a great place to start birding and we saw our first of the “must-see” birds of Veracruz, including Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, and Great-tailed Grackle. Along the beach were a variety of aquatic birds, including Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Laughing Gull, Willet, and Spotted Sandpipers. Plus, we found our first migrants of the trip, including Baltimore Oriole and Blue Grosbeak. Interestingly, we saw the Monk Parakeets that have recently colonized the area and a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher.



After this satisfying morning, we enjoyed the Hotel Mocambo’s delicious buffet breakfast, packed up our minivan, and headed off for adventure. Our first stop was the Totonac archeological site of Cempoala, where we enjoyed a tour by a local guide, ably translated by Kashmir. This was the first of the “pile of rocks” to be visited and everyone found it fascinating. In addition, we saw our first raptors of the trip, including some Broad-winged Hawks, Mississippi Kites, Ospreys, and a flock of 40+ Anhinga flying overhead. We then went on to the famed Hotel Bienvenido in the small town of Cardel, where we checked into our base for the next 3 days. We had lunch and then drove to the town of Chichicaxtle to visit the Mario Ramos Bird Observatory. Pronatura Veracruz maintains two hawk-counting sites in this area, one on the roof of the Hotel Bienvenido, and the other on the roof of the Bird Observatory.



We observed a moderate raptor flight that afternoon, including many Mississippi Kites, and several local species that were new for the trip, including Buff-bellied Hummingbird and Scrub Euphonia. At the end of the afternoon, we returned to the Hotel Bienvenido for showers, the daily checklist, and dinner.



## Friday, Sept. 27 Coastal Birding | Afternoon Hawk Watching

After an early breakfast, we loaded up and headed to the Cansaburro dunes area to look for birds on a platform built by Pronatura Veracruz overlooking a privately-owned wetland. The morning light was fantastic and even Pico de Orizaba (at 18,461 feet, the highest point in Mexico and 3<sup>rd</sup> highest in North America) put in an appearance on the far horizon. This spot was a fabulous birding area with many species to be seen without hardly moving at all from the platform. Among the highlights here were more Yellow-crowned Night-Herons in one place than any of us had seen before, an adult Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Muscovy Duck, Laughing Falcon, Vermilion Flycatchers, a Couch's Kingbird (which fortunately called for us), and a Pectoral Sandpiper (which made Kashmir and Dave work the field guides pretty hard). On the drive out, we had great views of a Lineated Woodpecker in the trees beside the narrow road. What a super way to start our second day!

We continued north to the archeological site of Quiahuixtlan, a Totonac burial site for important personages. This fascinating site is perched on a hill with a dramatic view out over the Gulf of Mexico—it was easy to see the attraction of the area as a cemetery. Kashmir ably guided us around the site and a few birds were seen, a close fly-by Zone-tailed Hawk and a male Northern Cardinal. Also of interest, were many Rose-bellied Lizards (*Sceloporus variabilis*) crawling around the tombs and temples and the fascinating red cage fungus (*Clathrus ruber*), a kind of stinkhorn. Feeling quite satisfied and hungry, we headed back to Cardel and the Hotel Bienvenido for a well-deserved lunch.

Later in the afternoon, we drove back to Chichicaxtle for more hawk-watching, encountering thousands of Broad-winged Hawks passing over, many Mississippi Kites, another Osprey, and another Zone-tailed Hawk. Toward the end of the day, we headed to the town of La Antigua and visited the Casa de Cortez (Hernan Cortez' first real house in the New World) and the Ermita del Rosario, the first church in the New World. It was fascinating to think that both buildings still exist and to consider whom has passed through each over the centuries. At the end of the afternoon, we boarded a lancha at the La Antigua boat dock for a boat trip down the Rio La Antigua to its mouth and back. The boat trip was a real highlight of the trip and allowed close approach to many water birds, including a spectacular juvenile Bare-throated Tiger-Heron (who swallowed a large fish, whole, as we watched!); many terns including Royal, Sandwich, Gull-billed, and a Forster's; Ringed, Amazon, and Green Kingfishers; a variety of shorebirds; and a Crested Caracara and a Turkey Vulture fighting over a dead fish.

We finished up this fabulous day with a wonderful dinner at the Las Delicias Marinas restaurant right by the river, then headed back to our lodging at the Hotel Bienvenido, Cardel.



## **Saturday, Sept. 28 Coastal Birding | Afternoon Hawk Watching**

After another hearty breakfast at the Hotel, we piled into our mini-van and headed to the coast again, this time to Playa Juan Angel (or Johnny Angel Beach). Although it started to rain lightly soon after we arrived, we nevertheless added several water birds and shorebirds to the trip list, including the only Long-billed Curlew of the trip, Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plover, Pied-billed Grebe, and a variety of water birds, including a Black-crowned Night-Heron.

Retreating from the rain along the coast, we headed inland to the Paso Mariano area to bird a few areas near the La Antigua River further upstream. This fascinating location yielded many interesting birds, including good views of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Squirrel Cuckoo, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, both sexes of Rose-throated Becard, Plain Chachalaca, a singing Canyon Wren, and the local, endemic subspecies of Rufous-naped Wren. Feeling well-satisfied with the bird views, we turned to the need to satisfy our stomachs and returned to the Hotel for lunch.

The afternoon was devoted to hawk-watching, first from the roof-top of the Hotel and later at Chichicaxtle. Again, the hawk flight was pretty amazing, with lots of "lines" of Broad-wings and Mississippi Kites, with a scattering of other things thrown in to test our identification skills, including Wood Stork, Turkey Vulture, Osprey, Peregrine Falcon, and a juvenile Snail Kite. Many of us took the opportunity to shop at Pronatura



Veracruz' gift shop at the Bird Observatory for t-shirts and other souvenirs (and to support their conservation work). We then returned to the Hotel for another night's rest after a very satisfying day.

## **Sunday, Sept. 29 Shade-Coffee Plantation, Xalapa**

We got up extra early for breakfast at the Hotel and were on the road a little after 6:30 am—heading straight for the mountains. Our first stop was a visit to the wonderful Rancho El Mirador, a shade-coffee hacienda at an elevation of 3500 ft, where we were greeted by the owners, Don Jorge and Doña Maria Guadalupe Müller (4<sup>th</sup> generation coffee growers). Although it was hard to steer away from exploring the delightful old hacienda building, we started seeing great birds right in the parking area of the hacienda! Right off the bat, we had great views of Blue-capped Motmot (a recent split from Blue-crowned Motmot and a Mexican endemic), Black-headed Saltator, Collared Aracari, Montezuma Oropendola, and Azure-crowned Hummingbird, among many more.

Amazingly enough, we pulled ourselves away from this visual feast, piling into the old ranch truck and we went on a tour of the hacienda and its beautiful shade coffee, birding along the way. Don Jorge discussed a lot of the aspects of his coffee business and some of its challenges and we were interrupted mid-morning by a coffee break in the plantation, with delicious coffee and wonderfully fresh bananas and breads. By the end of the morning, we had compiled a fabulous bird list, including Rufous-capped and Golden-crowned Warbler, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, Bananaquit, Masked Tityra, and several migrants from the north including Black-and-white, Black-throated Green, and Canada Warbler, American Redstart, and Louisiana Waterthrush.

After a great morning, we returned to the main hacienda building for a true, home-cooked Mexican lunch with tamales, barbacoa, and cerveza for those interested. Many of us also took the opportunity to buy some of the great, shade-grown coffee grown by the Müllers to take home. Toward the end of the afternoon, we regretfully took our leave of the Müllers, their two dogs Tosca and Mora, and their delightful hospitality to head toward Xalapa. We arrived at our accommodation for the next 2 days, the tranquil Posada del Cafeto in downtown



Xalapa, by 6:15pm. After unloading and cleaning up a bit, we walked a few blocks to a very nice dinner at the Restaurante Casona del Beaterio.

## Monday, Sept. 30 Highland Forest Birding | Xico

Today was largely devoted to exploring the higher elevation forests and other habitats above Xalapa, mostly on the slopes of the Cofre de Perote volcano. After an early breakfast at the Posada del Cafeto, we loaded up and headed up the highway to our first stop at the small community of La Joya (at about 7100 ft). The area around this community is largely dominated by Mexican weeping pine (*Pinus patula*) with oaks and other hardwoods mixed in. This was a new habitat for our tour and we quickly added a lot of new species to our trip list, including Brown-backed Solitaire (Dave's favorite bird song!); Golden-browed, Crescent-chested, Hermit, and Townsend's Warbler; Blue-throated and Amethyst-throated Mountain-Gem; Slate-throated Redstart; and quite a few more, including some species familiar to us in the western U.S. (Steller's Jay, Acorn Woodpecker, Yellow-eyed Junco, and Mexican Chickadee).

After a productive few hours, we headed further up in elevation to the area known as Las Minas (about 7750 ft) where we stopped at several sites and picked up Red (wow!) and Olive Warbler, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, and (a familiar face from home) White-breasted Nuthatch. We then explored the corn fields around the Ejido 20 de Noviembre and were able to find Black-headed Siskin and the endemic Striped Sparrow.

We grabbed a quick lunch of sandwiches by the side of the road (we were running late by this time) and drove to the historic town of Xico (many bought a jar of its famous mole to take home) and the nearby Cascada de Texolo. Although late in the day, we admired the view of the falls and found some nice species, including Chestnut-headed Oropendola, White-collared Swift, and a beautiful male Violet Sabrewing that was very obliging and perched for a long time, easily seen through the scopes. At the end of the day, we drove to the "pueblo mágico" of Coatepec for a lovely dinner right next to the zocalo with the Executive Director of Pronatura Veracruz, Elisa Peresbarbosa. Tired, but very happy, we took the short drive back to Xalapa to collapse into bed at the Posada del Cafeto.

## Tuesday, Oct. 1 Xalapa | Anthropology Museum | Cardel

After breakfast at the Posada, we made the short drive through Xalapa to the Parque Ecológico Macuiltépetl, a park consisting of an extinct volcanic cone in the middle of the city. What a wonderful island of green and tranquility in the middle of the chaos! We slowly walked and wound our way up to the crater at the top; it was such a lovely day and the birds so interesting, that we spent about 4.5 hours there. Many interesting things were



spotted, especially including Blue Mockingbird, Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, White-winged Tanager, Tropical Parula, Fab-tailed Warbler, and Brown-capped Vireo. The small natural history museum near the summit has a collection of injured and rehabbing hawks, so we all got a chance to examine closely (and hear!) these raptors, including White and Harris's Hawks, and a very raucous Laughing Falcon. Quite a few non-feathered organisms were seen, including the lovely Red-bellied Squirrel (*Sciurus aureogaster*), an opossum (or tlacuache), and several groups of the larvae of a species of sawfly which crawl around in clusters (aka caca de luna).

We had a delightful lunch at La Estancia de los Tecajetes restaurant, with its full menu of Xalapan specialties, and then headed over to the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa (MAX) for a two-hour guided tour with Sagrario Cruz, the local guide. The MAX is the second-best anthropology museum in Mexico and has a fabulous collection of artifacts and information on Mexican anthropology and archeology, with an emphasis on the cultures that arose along the southeast Mexican coast of the Gulf of Mexico. This is Sagrario's speciality and she told us more than we could possibly absorb about all these interesting cultures. We probably could have spent the entire day exploring that wonderful museum, but we had to break away in late afternoon and we proceeded back down to Cardel to our familiar lodgings at the Hotel Bienvenido, where we also had dinner.

## **Wednesday, Oct. 2 Las Barrancas | Tlacotalpan | Catemaco**

After an early breakfast and packing up the luggage in the minivan (which, by the end of the trip, Kashmir had become quite the master of) we headed south. Our first stop was the grasslands and wet prairies near the community of Las Barrancas. We spent about 2 hours exploring this very different habitat type, with its mix of grasslands, pasturelands, wetlands, and forest patches. We found our primary target species there, 6 Double-striped Thick-knees, an intriguing shorebird species that is near or at the northern limit of its range in this locality. Other interesting species we encountered, which are hard or impossible to find elsewhere on the trip, included Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Green-breasted Mango, and Eastern Meadowlark.

We then proceeded to our next stop, the town of Alvarado, where we loaded up in a lancha for our second boat trip around portions of the extensive Alvarado Lagoon wetland complex. The Alvarado Wetlands are a designated Ramsar wetlands of international importance and have been an area of active conservation, restoration, management, and community outreach by Pronatura Veracruz for many years. The boat trip lasted about 2.5 hours, during which we explored the lagoon, its fringing mangrove forests, and a few side channels. It would have taken days to fully explore this huge (267,010 ha) site! Among the many birds spotted during the boat trip included both Common and Great Black Hawk, Russet-naped Wood-Rail, the mangrove race of Yellow Warbler (resident at this locality), Mangrove Swallow, Barred Antshrike, Rufous-breasted Spinetail, and the fabulous Black-collared Hawk, a wetland-specialist.



After the very satisfying boat trip, we headed to the historic, world heritage town of Tlacotalpan on the banks of the Papaloapan River for lunch at Doña Lala's restaurant. After another satisfying lunch, we continued south on our journey to Catemaco, driving to our delightful accommodations at the Hotel Playa Azul, right on the shore of Lake Catemaco. A few of us still had energy for a short walk around the heavily forested grounds of the Hotel, where we discovered a Buff-throated Saltator, the only one of the trip! We had dinner outdoors at a lakeside table and were serenaded by a singing Common Pauraque while eating.

### **Thursday, Oct. 3 Nanciyaga | Los Tuxtlas | Balzapote**

After breakfast at the Hotel Playa Azul, we began our exploration of the Catemaco region. First, we headed to the nearby Nanciyaga Reserve, a beautiful forested tract also beside the shore of Lake Catemaco. We heard Howler Monkeys making their odd sounds at our first stop in the reserve and quickly began to find many birds along the entrance road. Highlights included several Scarlet Macaws, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermit, and, perhaps best of all, several Great Curassows crossing the road! Ovenbirds and Northern Waterthrushes were walking on the road, too, and Dave and Kashmir spotted a fine male Hooded Warbler in the trees. Heading out to the boat dock of the reserve, we had fine views of egrets, herons, Neotropical Cormorants, and (with the aid of tape playback), three Ruddy Crakes foraging in the aquatic vegetation literally 3 feet below us. After a great morning birding, we nourished ourselves at Nanciyaga's Quenchabe Restaurant with its delicious hand-made corn tortillas.

After lunch we continued on to bird the roadside through the famed Los Tuxtlas Tropical Biological Station. A variety of birds were seen here, too, including Lesser Greenlet, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, and three Black-crowned Tityras (which were not only new for the trip



bird list, but were life birds for Kashmir). A variety of migrants were spotted here, too, including Red-eyed Vireo, Chestnut-sided Warbler, and American Redstart. At the end of the afternoon, we took a quick drive down to the coast to the town of Balzapote and admired the view over the gulf—a fine way to conclude the day. We then returned to the Hotel Playa Azul, with a stop at a grocery store along the way to pick up some wine to have with our last full dinner “in the field.” Dining outside along the lake again, we once more heard the pleasant sounds of the Pauraque calling.

## **Friday, Oct. 4 Ruiz Cortines | Veracruz**

We began our last full day with an early, pre-dawn start, with breakfast at the Hotel Playa Azul. Listening carefully, we were also treated to both Ferruginous Pygmy- and Mottled Owls calling in the early darkness—a nice way to start the day. Packing up all our gear for the last time, we headed up into the mountains to explore the area near the small community of Ruiz Cortines, the site of a community-based birding tourism effort. This community is surrounded by high elevation montane and cloud forest, habitat types which we had previously not encountered yet. During the morning, we birded several different sites around the town, finding a nice array of fabulous species. Probably the best bird was an adult Ornate Hawk-Eagle, seen well by everyone perched high in a tree and also in flight. Other species found of great interest included Tuxtla Quail-Dove (endemic to these mountains), Lesson’s Motmot, Eye-ringed Flatbill, Yellow-billed Cacique, Slate-colored Solitaire, Chestnut-capped Brushfinch, Tody Motmot, Buff-throated and Scaly-throated Foliage-Gleaner, and the spectacular Blue-crowned Chlorophonia. We also finally, after trying all trip long, found a trogon: a male Collared Trogon.

After this exciting morning, we returned to Ruiz Cortines itself for lunch, in the community operated dining room, for another wonderful meal. Right after lunch, the skies opened up for the hardest rain of our entire trip. But, as the rain let up, many of us walked across the street to the bird feeders set up by Braulio (one of the community bird monitors) and were able to get great looks of the Tuxtla-endemic Long-tailed Sabrewing. Deeming the rain to have let up sufficiently, we climbed back into the van for the drive back to Veracruz/Boca del Río and the Hotel Mocambo. After freshening up a bit, we reconvened for our final “cena de despedida” in the Mocambo’s dining room and recounted our many adventures.

## **Saturday, Oct. 5 Departures**

All good things come to an end, and so did this Naturalist Journeys trip to Veracruz! Everyone departed at various times, including intrepid travelers Kathleen and Rebecca who continued on in search of the perfect “chiles en nogada” in Puebla! We will always remember all the wonderful birds and places we saw and hope to get back very soon.

### **Photo Credits:**

Group on the boat, Mark Amershek (MA) Sabrewing, MA; Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Dave Mehlman (DM); Eurasian Collared-Dove, DM; Tropical Kingbird, Mike Boyce (MIBO); Great Kiskadee, MIBO; Baltimore Oriole, Doug Greenberg; Vermilion Flycatcher, Carlos Sanchez (CASA); Birding photos, MA; Sitting with binoculars, MA; People photos, Brenda Sabo (BS); Russet-naped Wood-Rail, Pat Lueders (PALU); Common Tody-Flycatcher, Naturalist Journeys Stock; Counters, MA; Boat trip, MA; Tourists, MA; Hawk Eagle, MA; Group question time, MA; Birders! MA.