

BIRDING IN MAZATLAN, MEXICO - by Harvey Robbins

This past February, Bill Purnis, Flo MacLeod, Ida and I travelled to **Mazatlan** on the Mexican Pacific coast in **Sinaloa State** opposite the tip of Baja California. Mazatlan is nestled between the Pacific and the **Sierra Madre Occidentals**, the highest mountain range in Mexico. The huge altitude changes from sea level to over 3,000 m result in the greatest biological diversity, including nearly 550 species of birds, in all of Mexico. While Mazatlan is a wonderful place to enjoy the beaches and the local hospitality usually in perfect weather, it was the unique bird-watching opportunities that became an integral part of our vacation.

Our birding excursions began with walks along the beaches where shore birds such as **pelicans, oyster catchers, avocets, gulls, turns, shearwaters, plovers, sandpipers** are found in abundance. Looking inland, we often saw large scavengers typical of the adjacent **dry thorn forest** of the region. Most abundant are **ravens, Sinaloa crow, crested caracara and vultures** with the odd **eagle** thrown in. **Woodpeckers** and small **song birds** are also abundant in the thorns, saguaro cactus and scattered deciduous trees.

Totally different avian fauna were found in the nearby dry thorn bushes of an abandoned field –**vermillion flycatchers, wrens, hummers and warblers** graced our camera lenses. We then got the idea to walk the El Cid golf course near our hotel. The course is laid out with alternating fairways and streets between, the houses backing along each side of the former. Here was a diverse tropical paradise with iguanas and an abundance of birds to accompany. Most notable were the many **woodpeckers** in the palm trees (Bill even spotted a large iguana in the top of a tall palm), several species of **doves, numerous hummers, fly catchers, cardinals, tanagers, orioles and sparrows** to name a few.



And the ponds along the fairways attracted a myriad of waterfowl, **western ducks** such as the colourful **shoveler, coots**, two or three species of **herons, ibises**, and yes, even **cormorants**.



We also made a week-long excursion up into the mountains and canyons –**Copper Canyon country** -by train, and took a road tour back down to the canyon bottom. This is not a trip for the faint-hearted but the scenery was just stupendous and once again we saw many different species of birds at the many stops. Most abundant were **woodpeckers, chickadees, cardinals** and surprisingly **hummers** of which there are 20 species in this region of Mexico. The latter were most abundant at a series of feeders at our hotel on the rim of the canyon at Posada Barrancos (altitude 2400 m); this despite temperatures similar to those on dry October days back home. Down at the bottom



of the canyon, we were back in a tropical environment where I even heard a **barred owl** off in the distance.

If you are interested in visiting Copper Canyon country, we suggest you go to the **California Native Adventures** website at <http://www.calnative.com/> where there is a large amount of information about Copper Canyon tours of all types –including the 8 day tour to the bottom of the canyon which we took.

On our return to Mazatlan, we took a short boat ride to Deer Island (Mazatlan means ‘deer’ in the local native language) and I hiked to the top. This provided a wonderful view of downtown and the Golden Zone of hotels but was disappointing from a bird-watching perspective. A better trip would be a Kayak tour around this and/or bird island where **pelicans,**

**frigate birds** and some species of **ducks** breed on the beaches.

The birding highlight of our trip occurred on February 24<sup>th</sup>, the day before our return home. Bill, Flo and I had booked a day-long birding tour to the **Tufted Jay Preserve** (<http://www.tufted-jay-preserve.org/>), high in the Sierra Madres with **Sendero Mexico**, a local tour company. It quickly became evident while driving the 2 ½ hrs from Mazatlan to the mountain village of El Palmetto that our Guide, native Canadian **Carolyn Felderhof** was one of the most knowledgeable and well-connected guides in northwest Mexico. Please go to: <http://www.senderomexico.com/senderobirding/tour-leader-guide> for details of Carolyn’s accomplishments and the tours she leads. While telling us about setting up the first annual **Mazatlan Bird Festival** held this past January (<http://www.mazatlanbirdfestival.com/>), Carolyn would quickly identify many local birds as they flew across in front of our vehicle or sang in the nearby forest. By 7:00 AM we had reached the highest ridge in the mountains to the east of Mazatlan and the entrance to the **Tufted Jay Preserve**. After a short but steep run up the access trail (very similar to our logging roads), we parked and immediately began hearing the songs of many species of songbirds in the early morning quiet. **Vireos, warblers** including **redstarts, creepers** and **hummers** were abundant in the mixed age forest consisting of pines and oaks. Wild flowers were abundant as well as mistletoe in full orange bloom hanging over the tops of many trees. But there was no sign of what we had come for.

Back into our four-wheel drive vehicle we jumped and moved up the road to a spot with which Carolyn was very familiar. Ahead was a fruiting tree and almost immediately we spotted the **eared quetzal**- a rare sighting indeed of this endangered species. We were treated to several minutes of excellent viewing giving ample time for taking photos. Carolyn tells us that she has a couple arriving from



Photo: Bill Purnis

England the following week spending \$2500 each just to see this bird!

Driving along at a snail's pace, we spotted a group of **band-tailed pigeons** and then several **mountain trogons**. These are birds larger than

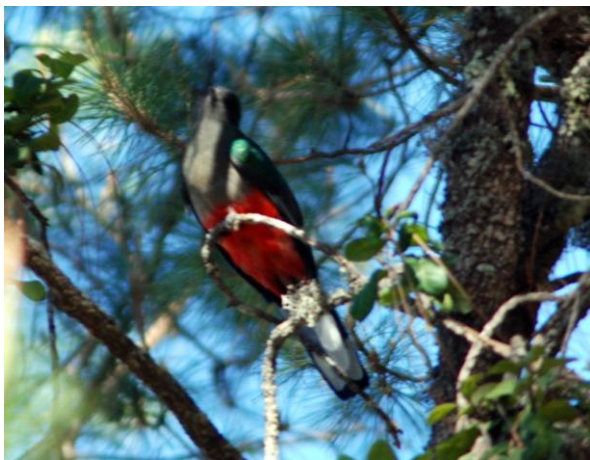


Photo: Bill Purnis

blue jays, colourful like the quetzal but more abundant. After a few minutes we reached an open area, the camp headquarters with four cottages, two of which are just being completed. We set out a wonderful lunch provided by Carolyn on the benches next to a cottage and immediately spotted a large **red-tailed hawk** high up on the top of a pine tree. We listen for other species and heard songbirds in the nearby forest while eating.

After lunch, we embarked on a short walk to the back side of the ridge where we descended to the edge of the canyon with huge volcanic boulders scattered amongst the mistletoe-covered trees. The boulders are covered with orchids, ferns, mosses and Bromeliads with a few flowering plants between. We admire the wonderful views of the cliffs across the canyon valley and wonder whether the **Imperial woodpecker**, now thought extinct, might still be hidden in these steep valleys unexplored by humans. But there are still no large birds- many small songbirds do abound – and we head back to the camp. After we walked down the road in the opposite direction, Carolyn catches up with us and says we should return to our vehicle and we will try one last location.

Then suddenly, her trained ears catch the distant calls of the **tufted jays** and she plays



Photo: Bill Purnis

their call from a CD – they respond, we walk quickly and soon see the first one. We are mesmerized by this large dark blue and white bird with a tuft of feathers on the top of its head reminiscent of a Roman gladiator. And then there are others and our hearts beat quickly as we see a pair flitting from tree to tree around us in what is likely their pre-mating and nest location ritual. Several birds are seen nearby many calling back and forth. We realize we are in their midst and that they hardly notice us. Cameras click and binoculars are pressed against our faces. A colourful **blue mockingbird** then flies in to get in on the action! Carolyn

quietly explains that tufted jays are colonial – one pair mates and the rest of the colony of 8 or 10 support and protect this pair. She explains that the colony is looking for a nesting site and with her binoculars she inspects some possible clusters of leaves and branches for evidence



Photo: Bill Purnis

that they have chosen a spot. Then we see a young bird in a nearby tree tearing apart a mouse. This is the first reported sighting of such predation by tufted jays and amazes Carolyn as has her first viewing of the pre-mating ritual. And as quickly as they appeared, the colony

disappears down the hillside. We realize that an hour has gone by and that we are overdue for our 4:00 pm return to Mazatlan. We quickly get back in our vehicle and take the long road back out of the mountains arriving about 5:30. But what a day it had been –we had seen it all and we make a toast to the experience that we will probably never repeat.

I am writing this as a thank you to Carolyn and to recommend to any birder who reads this the tremendous birding opportunities that await you in the Mazatlan area. And we haven't even been to the San Blas area, three hours south of Mazatlan, where the tropical deciduous forest birds like **parrots, parakeets, trogons** and many other species are found in abundance. We highly recommend that those who can travel consider a birding trip to Mazatlan, perhaps during next year's Bird Festival and that you retain Carolyn for her experience, knowledge and professionalism. The quality of the websites referred to above in part attests to her dedication and abilities. May you be as fortunate as we were to experience what you hope you will see!