



By [Dawn Hewitt](#) on February 22, 2017 [Leave a Comment](#)

Birding Chiapas, Mexico's Southernmost State



It was an invitation I couldn't refuse: My dear friend Marie's husband would be spending about a week at a work conference in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, in late October. Would I like to accompany them, and Marie and I would go birding while Raymundo was working? You bet I would! Marie isn't a lister, but enjoys adventure, and she "gets" birding. She even accompanied me on a Big Day many years ago. She agreed with my proposal to hire a birding guide for our week in Mexico's southernmost state, so I contacted Chiapas Birding Adventures. Even though our timeframe didn't match their listed itineraries, they were flexible in accommodating us, and planned a few days in the



Selfie of our entourage at Sumidor Canyon: Daniel, Marie, Raymundo, Raul, and Brock.

highlands around San Cristobal, and then a two-night adventure into the selva (lowland jungle).

San Cristobal isn't served by an airport, so we flew into Tuxtla Guterrez, an hour west. That's where we met Brock, Raul, and Daniel, the team from Chiapas Birding Adventures who would be our birding guides and chauffeur for the week.

We took the scenic route to San Cristobal via Parque Nacional Canyon del Sumidero. The route to the top of the mountain wasn't very birdy, but the view at the top was breathtaking. Black vultures soared above, and American white pelicans in the river below were tiny, even

through my scope. Near the visitor center, we happened upon a birdy grove of trees, and I got my first lifer: banded wren. The other birds there were mostly familiar friends from back home: warbling vireo blue-gray gnatcatcher; magnolia, black-throated green, and black-and-white warbler; and American redstart; plus a couple of westerners: Townsend's warbler and western tanager. It was a long drive for just a few birds, but the view was worth it.



The central plaza at San Cristobal de las Casas is vibrant day and night.

Our first adventure was to the Orquideas Moxviquil Jardin Botanico (Moxviquil orchid garden) on the edge of town, where an American ex-pat rescues orchids, epiphytes, and other native plants, creating a paradise for them, and, as a side effect, creating a paradise for birds. Near the central office building, trees were thick with blossoms, as well as Mexican violetear, magnificent, and white-eared hummingbirds—up close and personal. We also got to watch cinnamon-bellied flowerpiercers in action, boring into the base of an unopened bud for first dibbs at nectar.

Brock and Marie were both concerned that a teacher's strike would cause road closures, traffic jams, detours, and delays, but that was never a problem during our week in Chiapas. Some friends at home were concerned about my safety. In fact, I felt very safe during my entire stay in all locations throughout Chiapas. San Cristobal is a charming, comfortable, vibrant town, with a dozen or so indigenous cultures in nearby residence.



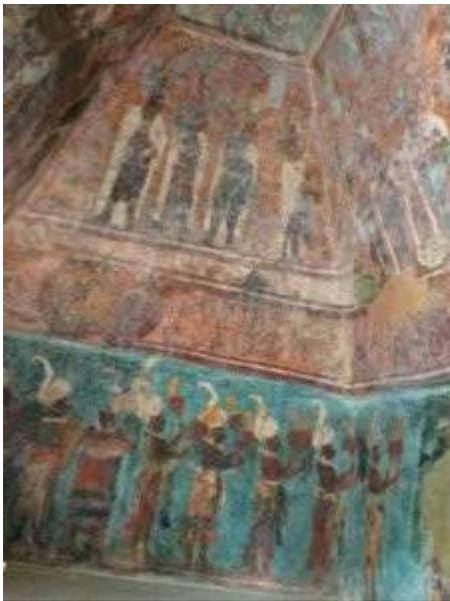
White-eared hummingbird at Moxvaqui Orchid Garden.



See the hole in the green base? A flowerpiercer's handiwork

We went birding at several other locations in and near San Cristobal, but we spent both afternoons on cultural tours. We visited the fascinating little towns of Zinacantan and Chamula, both populated primarily by indigenous people. Our tours of the cathedrals and a home-based textile cooperative were fascinating. The meals we ate at restaurants in San Cristobal were delicious, entertaining, and authentically local. We also visited an indigenous-clothing museum that funds a walk-in clinic—a unique and fascinating experience. I wasn't

expecting to enjoy the non-birding components of the trip as much as I did, but they were every bit as memorable as the spectacular birds I saw in Chiapas.



The murals at Bonampak.

When Raymundo's conference started, the rest of us headed east and downhill, on winding, bumpy highways. Speed bumps seem to be Chiapas' s method of speed-limit enforcement. Whenever we stopped for gas or lunch, we birded, and I got life birds (yellow-winged tanager, tropical mockingbird) at a gas station! I'm sorry I'm not good at bird photography, and I don't have the equipment.

Our destination was Bonampak, ancient Mayan ruins famous for its colorful, well-reserved murals. Birding there was amazing, too, and my lifers included melodious blackbird, golden-hooded tanager, white-breasted wood-wren, boat-billed flycatcher, brown-hooded parrot, Lesson's motmot, black-headed trogon, white hawk, and great tinamou—even though we were there for only a few hours.

We spent the night at a lovely and comfortable eco-lodge in Frontera Corrozal, right next to the Usumacinta River, Mexico's border with Guatemala. There were several black howler monkeys in the trees right above our heads! Next morning, we boarded a small boat and headed up river, destination Yaxchilan Zona Archaeological, another Mayan ruin, but more remote. We had barely departed, when one of our guides spotted a bat falcon perched on the Guatemala side of the river. Four keel-billed toucans crossed the international border,



Bat falcon!

themselves were magical and vast, and our party was alone there for most of the morning. Spider monkeys played in the trees! What a mystical experience to be in such an ancient and mysterious place, nearly alone.

Between the birds, the monkeys, and the ruins, it was almost sensory overload. Rufous-tailed jacamar! Barred antshrike! Wedge-billed woodcreeper! Lovely cotinga! Black-faced grosbeak! Collared aricari! Golden-hooded tanager!



White-whiskered puffbird! Photo by Raul Vasquez.

and mangrove swallows gleaning above the water were too numerous to count. We heard, then saw many Montezuma oropendolas.

The Yaxchilan ruins are a short hike from the boat dock, but it took nearly an hour to get there because the birds near the river were spectacular and cooperative: slaty-breasted tinamou, squirrel cuckoo, gartered trogon, white-whiskered puffbird, and brown-headed parrot, to name just a few. The ruins



Keel-billed toucan!

After a delicious lunch at the ecolodge, we spent much of the afternoon driving parallel to



Wild scarlet macaws! Photo by Raul Vasquez

the Guatemala border, picking up caracaras here, roadside hawk there, and as we approached our destination, four wild scarlet macaws!

Our destination was Las Guacamayas (scarlet macaw) Reserve, adjacent to the small town of Reforma Agraria, where our guide (Chiapas Birding Adventure owner Brock Huffman) had trained a contingent of local birding guides. Once again, our accommodations at the ecolodge were comfortable, even elegant. An enormous flight cage housing a handful of recuperating macaws was just outside our window.

In the morning, we took a boat ride up the Lacantun River into the Tzendales River, which is in the Monte Azules Reserve, where access is restricted. Oh, the birds! Social flycatcher! King vulture! Crested guans galore! An Amazon kingfisher! More scarlet macaws!



King vulture! Photo by Raul Vasquez

For the trip, I collected 125 species, many of which were lifers. The birding was phenomenal. The landscape was spectacular. Our guides made the entire trip easy and fascinating, and the cultural side trips were not to be missed. Our trip was shorter than the itinerary Chiapas Birding Adventures recommends, and I'm sorry my visit to Chiapas wasn't leisurely. There's so much to see and do in that state—I didn't even get to Palenque, Chiapas's most

famous Mayan ruin. The birding there is said to be amazing, too. I do hope to return again—as soon as possible. I highly recommend you investigate and plan your own Chiapas birding adventure.



About the Author

Dawn Hewitt is the managing editor for [Bird Watcher's Digest](#) and [Watching Backyard Birds](#). She has

Birding Chiapas, Mexico's Southernmost State >> Out There With the Birds Blog

been watching birds since 1978, and wrote a weekly birding column for [The Herald Times](#), a daily newspaper in Bloomington, Indiana, for 11 years.