



Fun Adventures in Chiapas By Chuck Sexton

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Through the generosity of Brock Huffman and Chiapas Birding Adventures, I was one of the recipients of a trip to Chiapas, Mexico, from last fall's Victor Emanuel Conservation Award Luncheon. Mary Kay and I scheduled our trip to Chiapas for the second week of January in the hopes of encountering a Golden-cheeked Warbler in their winter habitat around San Cristobal de Las Casas.

We spent ten days and nine nights with Brock and his two exceptionally

talented Mexican guides, Jose Raúl Vazquez and Daniel Soto, exploring the diversity of habitats in Mexico's southernmost state. We sampled the bird life from lowland forests to highland pine-oak woodlands, giving us access to a wide array of the resident tropical avifauna as well as a long list of wintering migrants. With Raúl and Daniel's help, we spotted 170 species of birds, including such highlights as several pairs of free-flying Scarlet Macaws, good looks at the minute American Pygmy-Kingfisher, and leisurely studies of such uncommon species as Gray-headed Tanager, White-naped Brush-Finch, and so many more. I padded my Life List and Mexico List with many new species.

We enjoyed all the wildlife, and as an iNaturalist, I always had my camera ready to document a tropical flower here, a strange insect there, or to attempt to get a few recognizable images of the many colorful butterflies dashing around. Blue-and-white Heliconian butterflies, Belize Crocodiles, and glimpses of an elusive Neotropical River Otter were just a few of the non-bird highlights.

This excursion is rightfully billed not only as a birding tour but as an in-depth introduction to the culture of Chiapas, one of the most diverse and interesting regions of the country. We had a guided tour of the Mayan ruins at Palenque with Alfonso Morales, a distinguished scholar on the Mayan culture and hieroglyphics. We breakfasted at the homes of local families, received a tour of a family-based business where artisans make exquisite hand-crafted pottery, and had guided tours of museums highlighting indigenous cultures, textiles, and customs.

Along with our self-imposed immersion in Spanish for our own benefit, Mary Kay and I also made a point of learning a few words in Chol, Tsotsil, and other indigenous languages! The accommodations on this tour were very comfortable and we lucked into mild weather in the lowlands, avoiding any sultry tropical heat. The mountains were actually quite cool (extra layers needed at night!). Insects were never a problem. Most importantly, we confirmed what we had widely heard that Chiapas is a safe region of Mexico in which to travel and vacation, especially with the guidance and driving skills of local guides and experts such as those provided by Chiapas Birding Adventures.

In two PRONATURA reserves in the mountains around San Cristobal de Las Casas, we spent about 1 1/2 days searching hard for Golden-cheeks. We failed to encounter that elusive visitor in the area—a needle in a tropical haystack—but I was just thrilled to spend time in their winter habitat and learn more about it's composition, structure, and dynamics. I can't be disappointed after enjoying a hike in humid oak forest draped with epiphytes and speckled with such denizens as Mountain Trogon, Cinnamon-bellied Flower-Piercer, Slate-throated Redstart, and Crescent-chested Warbler! And I just knew there was a Golden-cheek peering down at me from some high canopy hide-out.

