

# The Course: Training Bird Guides -Las Guacamayas, Chiapas, Mexico



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BROCK HUFFMAN

Our course to train bird guides was a tremendous success because of the leadership of Alberto Martinez-Fernandez. Pronatura Sur, A.C. should be extremely proud of his enthusiasm, his ornithological knowledge, his energy, and above all, his passion in helping the students become observers of birds and their importance to forests and ecology in general, and to those inhabiting Chiapas habitats in particular. As a teacher, he was not only highly respected by everyone, but his personality also was entertaining and likeable while at the same time being critically honest in his evaluations. His passion became obvious when he awakened the group at 4:00 A.M. to search for a Mottled Owl – while being sure the rest of the staff was awake as well. Praises are due to Alberto and also to Pronatura for having such a biologist on its team.

The course exceeded all of my preconceptions and expectations. In the beginning, I felt that if we completed the course with 5 or 6 students wanting to go forward with more courses and more studies, we would have been successful; instead we ended with the 13 students we began with. We worked them from 6:30 A.M. until 9:30 or 10:00 at night, with short meal breaks and a rest break in the afternoon. No student dismissed themselves from any of the walks, the instructive sessions, or the games in the evenings. They were always alert to what we were teaching. I was absolutely amazed. In 44 years of participation in conferences and courses for “continuing Legal Education”, an annual requirement in my profession, I was accustomed to seeing some of the attendees leave for coffee, go do other things, or generally appear bored and disinterested – **but not our group of 13.** Our students appeared thirsty for more information.

We had representatives from four different forest communities—Frontera Corozal, Las Guacamayas, el Ejidal Guanal, and Acapetahua. I was disappointed that individual women from Najá, Frontera Corozal and Las Guacamayas did not attend because evidently they were afraid they would be the only women at the training. We will be sure next time to keep them in-

formed of the names of all students who will be attending. I believe it is important to be sure we have female representatives.

Truly the students had knowledge of the birds, and their eyes were really sharp in spotting them (the five students from Frontera Corozal returned one of our field guides wherein they had written the bird names in their *Ch'ol* language.

We took the students in two groups on two walks daily where they were drilled on silhouettes (partly due to lack of sunlight) and on identification otherwise by size, color of eyes, feathers, legs, beaks, wings, tails, etc... Back in the classroom, we split into groups and practiced drawing the birds with colored pencils, species they had identified in the morning. We studied our equipment, the basic parts of the bird, characteristics of the birds, what a bird guide should include and how to use it, the rules and ethics of birding, how to describe a bird's position

in a tree, expectations from tour groups, and how to take care of tourist birders' needs, what equipment they will need, etcetera. We walked in cattle fields, in thick and compact wet jungle, and we entered the Monte Azul Reserve with two launch boats, where we ended with a checklist of more than 115 birds identified by the students. We watched bird slides with bird photos which included both English and Spanish names and we repeated the names in English over and over until improvement became evident. At night we played “Bingo” with 50 bird pictures, taught by Memo Mena (aka Harry Potter/Mandrake). Improvement was evident the following day, both in identification of the birds and in their English pronunciation.

Friday evening, we sent the students home with the binoculars donated by the ABA's Birders' Exchange, which they had used during the week and agreed to take care of until the next course; with “bird” coloring books in Spanish for their families, donated by Jack Eitinear; with hummingbird feeders for their community; and most importantly with a newfound interest in the birds and in protecting their forest habitat. I told the students I would be back in a couple of weeks with Howell and Webb's *Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America* field guides, tapes of bird songs with identification by name, along with CD players to practice with. If I were a betting man, I would bet we will be amazed by the advancement in their knowledge between courses.

I have to mention our staff was outstanding. In addition to Alberto, we had Alex Dzib, a nature bird guide from the Yucatan. Both led bird walks and Alex also helped with the classes. Also, Daniel Soto, university student, well advanced in his studies of eco-tourism, and Memo Mena, a school teacher for 18 years, who is one of the most amazing storytellers I have ever heard.

As you can probably tell, I am really encouraged by what I witnessed in this course. Obviously, if we have local bird guides in this area (and there are none presently that I could find), and if these guides can identify the bird as well as their English names, I believe, with the use of websites and the additional draw of the area's ruins in Palenque, Bonampak and Yaxchilán, we can attract many English-speaking bird watchers. This should benefit not only the guides financially, but stimulate the economy of the communities where the lodges, restaurants, and souvenir sellers are situated. The forests will thus be protected because the citizens can see an economic benefit in doing so. This is much more effective than just “telling them” to protect the forests. They have such wonderful and beautiful flora and fauna to share with others and an incredibly rich, exciting and varied culture to be proud of and to share with others.

I am proud of what Pronatura Sur, A.C., the American Birding Association-Birders' Exchange, and Eco-Logic Latin-America, Inc. have done in this course, and I hope we can continue to work together.

*Brock Huffman has been a criminal defense trial lawyer for 43 years. His keen interest in working in Latin America began with a summer as a student missionary in Cuba in 1957 and in Honduras in 1958. He graduated from the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service with honors in 1963, and from the University of Texas Law School in 1966. Brock has birded all over*



Mexico's Future Bird Guides. © Brock Huffman.

Mexico, the Central American countries, and in Peru and Ecuador and is the author of *Aves De La Selva Lacandona De Chiapas - Birds of the Lacandon Jungle of Chiapas*.

For more information on how you can assist ABA's Birders' Exchange, please contact Betty Petersen, Birders' Exchange Director, [bpetersen@abaa.org](mailto:bpetersen@abaa.org), or Chip Clouse, Birders' Exchange Coordinator, [cclouse@aba.org](mailto:cclouse@aba.org).

## Rusty Blackbird Winter Hotspots Blitz

RUSSELL GREENBERG

For ten grueling days last February, nearly 200 birders scoured wetlands in 27 states hoping to encounter what has become an increasingly uncommon sight, a flock of Rusty Blackbirds. Some birders came back empty-handed, but many more were able to report the species on their eBird checklists. The effort turned up more than 19,000 Rusty Blackbirds at almost 225 sites.

These reports, combined with information about the group size and composition of males and females, has begun to provide a map of where the last remaining concentrations of the species are located and help in future research and conservation planning. The focused effort to locate this rapidly declining species is named the "Rusty Blackbird Winter Hotspots Blitz," or the Rusty Blitz, for short. Because of the value of these hard-won data, birders will be blitzing again from 30 January–15 February 2010. So any birder willing to put on some boots, walk some dikes, check out some swamps, and try your hand at Rusty Blackbird blitzing can make an important contribution to the conservation of this mysterious bird.

Until recently, few people paid much attention to the Rusty Blackbird's population status. Rusties breed in wetlands across the vast and often trackless boreal forests from New England to the Brooks Range in Alaska, largely out of sight of birders and ornithologists. As for the winter, Rusties are blackbirds, and blackbirds as a group are generally considered adaptable to human ways. We now know that Rusty Blackbirds are quite specialized in their winter habitat use, feeding on invertebrates in seasonally flooded forests supplemented with the mast of certain oak species and pecans.

All evidence suggests that Rusty Blackbirds have been declining for a very long time. However, it was not until analysis of both the Breeding Bird Survey and the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) showed depressingly high rates of decline (85–95%) over the past four decades, that the birding community began to pay attention to the decline.

The reasons for a decline of this magnitude are probably various, including wetland pollutants (such as methyl mercury), logging, and climate change affecting boreal wetlands during the breeding season. On the wintering grounds, losses of wooded wetlands to agriculture, as well as massive changes in hydrology of the seasonally flooded bottomlands along river systems, almost certainly play major roles in the decline of this species. Habitat conservation on the wintering ground is key. But given that most of the potential habitat is heavily managed, we need to understand what makes for good Rusty Blackbird habitat so we can include their requirements in wetland management strategies. The first step in doing this is locating reliable sites, particularly those that still

support large flocks. The idea is that places that reliably support large numbers of Rusties need to be located and studied so we know precisely what habitats Rusties like.

Why not just rely on CBC data? Wintering Rusty Blackbirds are tricky to monitor. They are patchy and often unpredictable in their occurrence. The extended fall migration appears to change in timing and distance with the severity of winter temperatures and the abundance of rain. Rusty Blackbirds can also be very quiet and hard to find, particularly early in the winter when CBCs are conducted. Locating birds, particularly away from known blackbird night roosts, requires single minded focus and dedication. For these reasons, the Blitz was initiated to complement the long-term data acquired from the CBC.

Preliminary analyses of the 2009 data are posted at [http://nationalzoo.si.edu/ConservationAndScience/MigratoryBirds/Research/Rusty\\_Blackbird/blitz.cfm](http://nationalzoo.si.edu/ConservationAndScience/MigratoryBirds/Research/Rusty_Blackbird/blitz.cfm).

Reports of Rusties came from Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Not included in the 27 states are single records of vagrants from three states far from the core winter range: Alaska, California, and Washington.

Only one-third of the reports listed more than 50 birds, and about one-eighth were for groups of over 100. Megaflocks of 500 or more Rusties were found in the upper Mississippi Alluvial Valley and a scattering of other locations in the south Atlantic region, including several thousand in a pecan orchard in Tennessee. Already some of these hotspots are the focus of research action and have been used to potentially identify Important Bird Areas. If we can keep up the Blitz for a few years, many more hotspots can be identified, and the year-to-year reliability of Rusties' use of these sites can be assessed.

The Rusty Blackbird Hotspots Blitz is a collaborative project between the International Rusty Blackbird Technical Working Group and eBird (Cornell Lab of Ornithology/National Audubon Society). For details, please see the website at the URL given above, which will be updated in December with the protocol for the next blitz.

Russell Greenberg is head of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center at the National Zoological Park in Washington, DC. His research interests span the Western Hemisphere, focusing on habitat selection, the ecology and evolution of migration, interspecific interaction, and use of human-modified tropical habitats. He co-chairs the International Rusty Blackbird Technical Working Group, which now consists of more than 55 ornithologists, wildlife specialists, and others interested in studying this species.

Rusty Blackbird photographed on the wintering grounds at Deer Creek, Stoneville, Mississippi, 2 February 2007. © G. Hofmann and C. Mettke-Hofmann

