

EL TRIUNFO

Mexico's 'Lost World'

Wednesday 15th February – Friday 24th February 2012 (10 days)

Leader: Mark Van Beirs

Group Size Limit: 8

Tour Category: Easy to Moderate

The magnificent country of Mexico has an amazing avifauna of over 1050 species, and, together with the more difficult-of-access northern Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, El Salvador and Nicaragua, holds no fewer than 215 regional endemics.

On our Western Mexico tour we record no fewer than 80 of these and on our Southern Mexico tour we find around 110. But one very special bird is seen on neither of these, for in a remote corner of this incredible country lives a semi-mythical bird that every international birder craves to see, the spectacular Horned Guan. The best place to admire this mind-boggling species is the wonderful Biosphere Reserve of El Triunfo, located on the highest ridges of the Sierra Madre in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas.

The El Triunfo cloud forest is enveloped in an almost constant mantle of mist, and is one of the most pristine and diverse natural areas remaining in Mexico. The reserve covers about 120,000 hectares and comprises several vegetation zones, including the most extensive area of cloud forest remaining in Mexico. With an avifauna of more than 400 species, El Triunfo holds some of the most fascinating and enthralling birds of the American tropics. Best of all is the wonderful Horned Guan, a truly bizarre member of the cracid family, that only occurs in the Mexican state of Chiapas and in neighbouring Guatemala. With its striking red horn, piercing white

eyes and arresting black and white plumage, this is surely one of the most outstanding birds in the world. The smart, but very localized Cabanis's or Azure-rumped Tanager keeps a low profile in its humid evergreen forest habitat and has a similar range. The brilliant Resplendent Quetzal is another of those 'must see before you die' birds and the local subspecies is favoured with an even longer tail than the ones in Costa Rica!

We begin our journey in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the huge capital of the state of Chiapas, from where we drive into the foothills of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas. The El Triunfo experience involves a fairly demanding four to five hour hike, but at a relaxed pace and with plenty of time to rest, to reach the base camp and six nights of camping in a couple of well chosen locations. But these minor hardships are a small price to pay as we stand a very good chance to see two of the most spectacular birds in the world: the Horned Guan and the Resplendent Quetzal. At night we will endeavour to locate the gorgeous and impressive Fulvous Owl in one of the forest giants, while listening to the loud, wailing calls of Cacomistles or Southern Ring-tailed Cats. Other bird phenomena of these eerie forests are Blue-throated Motmot, the delicate Rufous Sabrewing, Green-throated Mountain-gem, the charming Wine-throated Hummingbird, Yellowish Flycatcher, Black-throated Jay and Cabanis's Tanager. At lower altitudes, in semi-deciduous and upper tropical evergreen forest,

we should encounter the sneaky Pheasant Cuckoo, the endearing Tody Motmot, Green Shrike-Vireo and Black-capped Swallow.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins this evening in Tuxtla Gutierrez, where we will stay overnight.

Day 2 This morning we will leave the burgeoning capital of the southern state of Chiapas behind and drive southeast into the Sierra Madre de Chiapas to the village of Jaltenango for an overnight stay. In this arid agricultural area we will encounter a selection of common and widespread species like Western Cattle Egret, Black and Turkey Vultures, American Kestrel, Red-billed Pigeon, White-winged and Inca Doves, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Groove-billed Ani, Boat-billed and Social Flycatchers, Tropical Kingbird, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, the attractive White-throated Magpie-Jay, Melodious Blackbird, Great-tailed Grackle and Bronzed Cowbird.

Day 3 After a hearty breakfast we will board our open truck and drive to Finca Prusia, a large, semi-neglected coffee plantation, where the trail to El Triunfo starts. At the trailhead our

luggage and the provisions for our stay will be tied to several sturdy pack horses and mules, and we will start our 11km walk along a wide, well laid out, winding trail, which will lead us through patches of coffee and stretches of excellent broadleaf forest. We will listen for the distinctive loud, resonant notes of the delightful Tody Motmot and will try to obtain good views of this lovely critter. The far-carrying three note whistle of the secretive Pheasant Cuckoo resounds through the forest and with a bit of luck we will be able to see this parasitic species in all its glory. From the canopy the striking Green Shrike-Vireo will utter its tirelessly repeated song phrase, but locating this lovely species will require a bit of persistence. Other species we may encounter on our walk include White-tipped Dove, Green Parakeet, Squirrel Cuckoo, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, White-throated and White-collared Swifts, Canivet's Emerald, Azure-crowned Hummingbird, Acorn and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Northern Beardless and Paltry Tyrannulets, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Northern Bentbill, Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, the sneaky Stub-tailed Spadebill, Black Phoebe, Vermilion and



Dusky-capped Flycatchers, the near-endemic Black-capped Swallow, Plain Wren, White-breasted Wood-Wren, Clay-coloured Robin, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Yellow-throated Euphonia, the gorgeous Blue-crowned Chlorophonia, American Redstart, the striking White-winged Tanager and Baltimore Oriole. In late afternoon we will finally reach the famous El Triunfo clearing where we will set up camp in a glorious setting.

Days 4-8 The El Triunfo Biosphere Reserve is located among the peaks of the Sierra Madre mountains in southern Chiapas and covers an area of 1200 km². It spans an altitudinal range between 400 and 2700m and separates the warm, humid coastal lowlands from the drier interior. It is enveloped in an almost constant blanket of fog and is considered one of the most unspoiled and diverse natural areas remaining in Mexico. The Sierra Madre de Chiapas is a transition zone between the Nearctic and Neotropical biogeographical regions. As such, its flora and fauna are enriched by the northern and southernmost range extensions of many species. The Reserve features no fewer than ten different vegetation types, including humid tropical evergreen forest, tropical deciduous forest and pine-oak forest, but its unique cloud forest is by far the most appealing and threatened. El Triunfo's cloud forest is reported to host one of the most diverse arrays of tree species in Central America. Some of the evergreen trees here reach an amazing 90m above the forest floor and are covered in trailing vines, gigantic ferns, carpets of mosses, magnificent bromeliads, smelly arum lilies and luxuriant orchids. Amidst the often mist-

enshrouded mountains are giant tree ferns, sweetgum, towering Mexican alder, wild fuschia, oaks, wild avocado, and mulberry trees. The varied and complex vegetation types of El Triunfo are home to about 400 species of birds, 14 species of amphibians, 63 species of reptiles and 113 kinds of mammal. Ecotourism is well developed here and is aimed at generating income to support and strengthen the Reserve's management activities as well as benefitting local communities.

The bird we all will have travelled so far for is the spectacular Horned Guan, without a doubt one of the most mystifying, dramatic and fabulous species in existence. This stunning bird could nearly be considered the unicorn of the bird world. It only occurs in the Sierra Madre de Chiapas of Mexico and throughout west-central Guatemala and needs extensive areas of untouched cloud forest. The most unusual feature of this endangered and retiring species is its well developed red horn of bare skin on top of head. The population consists of just about 2,000 individuals and it usually betrays its presence by its low-pitched booming call or by its snorts, clicking and bill-clacking. The other icon of El Triunfo is the incomparable Resplendent Quetzal, considered by many to be the most beautiful bird in the world. The race here has an even longer tail than the better known form in Costa Rica and getting cracking views of this highly attractive species will be one of the priorities of this tour. Highland Guans (or Black Penelopinas) favour the mid levels of large trees. Their clear whistles and "crashing tree" display calls are amongst the most regularly heard sounds of these talkienesque forests. The jangling song of the

unassuming, Brown-backed Solitaire will be a distinctive background sound as we quietly walk along the narrow trails hoping for timid forest denizens like White-faced Quail-Dove, Ruddy-capped and Spotted Nightingale-Thrushes and Rufous-browed Wren. Mixed species flocks often hold marvels like Grey Silky, smart Crescent-chested and Golden-browed Warblers and the lovely Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer. Parties of sneaky Black-throated Jays travel quickly through the canopy and from the mid canopy the yodeling hoots of the rare Blue-throated Motmot reverberate. The arresting Yellow Grosbeak is represented here by the appealing, isolated orange race *aurantiacus*, which is sometimes treated as a separate species, the "Guatemalan Yellow Grosbeak".

At dawn the barks of Barred Forest-Falcons and the quavering whistles of Singing Quails will waken the forest and later in the day we will search for Green-throated Mountain-gem, Sparkling-tailed and the tiny Wine-throated Hummingbird in flowering trees. Parties of migratory warblers from North America are regularly encountered and may hold Tennessee, Black-throated Green, Townsend's, Black-and-white, Wilson's, Worm-eating and Swainson's Warblers. At night we will go in search of the splendid Fulvous Owl and the endearing Cacomistle or Southern Ringtail. The wailing squeals of this arboreal, catlike relative of the raccoon are often heard from the forest surrounding the campsite. Other species we could encounter in these outstanding, primeval forests include Red-tailed Hawk, Band-tailed Pigeon, Mexican Whip-poor-will Vaux's Swift, Berylline Hummingbird, Mountain and Collared Trogons,

Emerald Toucanet, Hairy Woodpecker, Scaly-throated and Ruddy Foliage-gleaners, Tawny-throated Leaf-tosser, Spotted and Streak-headed Woodcreepers, the shy Scaled Antpitta, Tufted Flycatcher, Greater Pewee, Hammond's and Yellowish Flycatchers, Grey-breasted Wood-Wren, Mountain and Black Robins, Unicolored Jay, Elegant Euphonia, Louisiana Waterthrush, Painted and Slate-throated Redstarts, Golden-crowned Warbler, Flame-coloured Tanager, Common Bush-Tanager, White-naped and Chestnut-capped Brush-Finches.

We will also spend some time at lower altitude on the Pacific slope, where in the humid broadleaf evergreen forest of the famous Cañada Honda (deep canyon) we will hope to see the endangered, sky-blue Azure-rumped or Cabanis' Tanager. This social species is restricted to the Pacific foothills of Chiapas and Guatemala, is only known from a handful of localities and shows a distinct preference for fig trees. We will also stand watch at flowering trees and bushes expecting to observe the modestly attired, localized Rufous Sabrewing and the minute Emerald-chinned Hummingbird. The very smart, but discreet Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo draws attention to itself by its raptor-like, rather plaintive calls and on the path we may surprise a harlequinesque White-eared Ground-Sparrow. We can also expect to find Thicket Tinamou, White-breasted Hawk (a split from Sharp-shinned Hawk), Grey and Broad-winged Hawks, Crested Guan, Mottled Owl, Violet Sabrewing, Green Violetear, Blue-crowned Motmot, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, Long-tailed Manakin, Rufous-and-white Wren (with its haunting song), Swainson's and White-

throated Thrushes, Green Jay and Plumbeous Vireo here. Troops of highly acrobatic, endearing Central American Spider Monkeys roam these great forests.

Day 9 After our final El Triunfo breakfast we will start walking down to Finca Prusia, trying to pick up any species that we might have missed earlier. We will

then drive to bustling Tuxtla Gutierrez for an overnight stay.

Day 10 The tour ends this morning at Tuxtla Gutierrez airport.

Accommodation & Road

Transport: The hotels are of normal Birdquest standard. There will be six nights of camping at El Triunfo in

special camps set up by our competent local outfitters. Tents are available for single or twin occupancy. Road transport is by minibus and roads are reasonably good.

Walking: The walking effort is easy to moderate. The uphill hike up to El Triunfo at the start of the visit takes about 5 hours, including regular birding stops, and is

on a wide, well constructed trail.

Climate: Generally warm or hot, dry and sunny at lower altitudes, but much cooler in upland areas. Whilst overcast weather is quite regular, rain is infrequent at this season.

Bird Photography: Opportunities are worthwhile.