

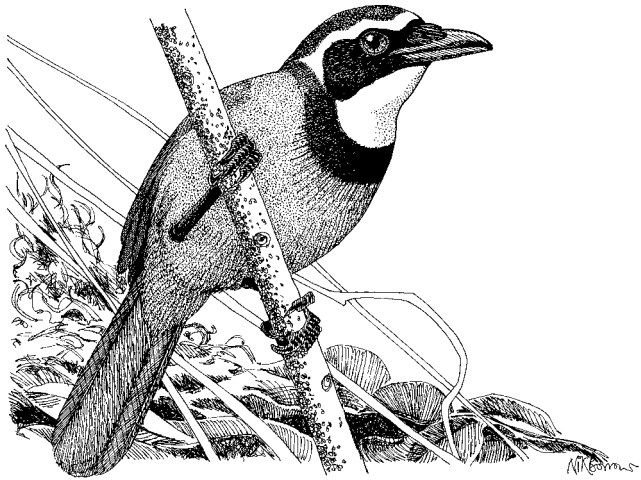
SOUTHERN MEXICO

Sunday 7th April – Friday 26th April 2013 (20 days)

Leader: To be confirmed

Group Size Limit: 7

Tour Category: Easy to Moderate for the most part (one or two optional fairly Demanding walks)



White-throated Jay (Nik Borrow)

Mexico, land of the Mayas, Aztecs, Zapotecs and Conquistadores, is one of the most charismatic countries in the world. Sombreros, white-clad peons on a stubborn mule and siestas conjure up a sleepy image which disguises (as well as any Zapata-style moustache) a country rapidly entering the modern world, where good roads, accommodation and food are the norm, and birding always rewarding. It is the second most populous and the third largest country in Latin America, with an incredible variety of habitats ranging from steamy tropical lowland jungle and barren cactus-studded hills to refreshing pine forests and high alpine vegetation above the treeline. Over half of the country is at an altitude of over 3300ft (1000m) and much of that at over 6600ft (2000m), and more than 80% of this splendid nation is classified as having a semi-arid climate.

Mexico basically consists of a high central plateau

flanked by an eastern and a western range of mountains set back from the coast. Mexico City, one of the largest conurbations on Earth with more than 20 million inhabitants, is located in a high inter-montane basin measuring only 30 miles (50 kilometres) across, and was founded as Tenochtitlan under the militarist rule of the Aztecs. As well as experiencing cactus-covered plains and sleepy adobe villages dominated by white-painted churches, a Hollywood-inspired stereotype of Mexico a hundred years ago, we shall visit modern skyscraper cities, well preserved Zapotec sites inspiring awe for Mexico's rich cultural history, tranquil oak and pine forests and fabulous mountains.

Mexico, both culturally and ornithologically, is a land of stark contrasts. A transitional zone between the temperate North American continent and the lush rainforests of Central

America, Mexico's position, physiography and contrasting habitats have produced an endemic-rich avifauna which, remarkably, is third only to Brazil and Peru amongst New World countries. Amazingly, no fewer than 213 species of birds are restricted to Mexico and northern Central America! Mexico is also the wintering ground of a splendid selection of colourful migrants from North America and the mixed warbler flocks are a real feature of its woods. This tour is designed to thoroughly explore the central and southwestern parts of the country, the richest region for birds in all Mexico, and our itinerary is the most comprehensive available for this endemic-rich part of the country. Accommodations, food and roads are mainly of a good standard, making travelling and birding in Mexico a pleasure.

Our journey starts in the cool forests on the volcanic slopes just to the south of Mexico City. Here we shall search for the rare Sierra Madre Sparrow at one of only two known remaining localities. Striped Sparrow and Black-poll and Hooded Yellowthroats are amongst the other endemics possible here.

In the state of Veracruz we will search limestone outcrops for the restricted-range Sumichrast's Wren, whilst the pine-oak forests of the Sierra de Juarez should yield a rich crop of specialities, including

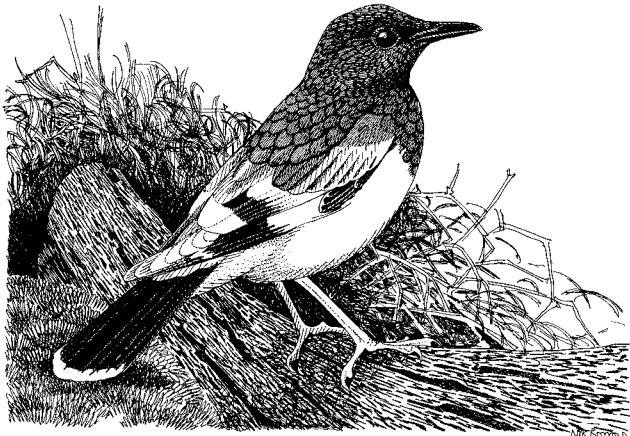
Unicoloured Jay, Slate-coloured Solitaire and White-naped Brush-Finch.

Continuing south we shall explore the deserts and woods around the attractive city of Oaxaca. This is the richest area in the country for endemic birds, home to Beautiful Hummingbird, Dwarf Jay, Ocellated Thrasher, Collared Towhee and Bridled and Oaxaca Sparrows amongst others.

We next descend to the Pacific lowlands where semi-deciduous woodland holds three extremely localized endemics: Blue-capped and Cinnamon-sided Hummingbirds, and the stunning little White-throated Jay. The offshore waters at Puerto Angel often produce Black Storm-Petrel and Townsend's Shearwater, together with an excellent selection of other pelagic species.

The arid scrub of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and coastal Chiapas is home to Orange-breasted and Rosita's Buntings, two of the most stunning of Mexico's many endemic birds, and the amazing Giant Wren is likewise found nowhere else. Breathtaking scenery at the El Sumidero Canyon near Tuxtla Gutierrez is augmented by the delightful Red-breasted Chat and the rare Belted Flycatcher, while not far away the striking but almost unknown endemic Nava's Wren inhabits limestone karst





Aztec Thrush (Nik Borrow)

outcrops. The sprightly, near-endemic Pink-headed Warbler is just one of our target species in the cool mountain forests surrounding the lovely town of San Cristobal de las Casas, where we will also keep our eyes open for gems like Blue-throated Motmot and Black-throated Jay.

Birdquest has operated tours to southern Mexico since 1987.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins this evening at Mexico City. Upon arrival we will transfer to our hotel at the southern edge of one of the largest cities on earth, where we will stay for two nights.

Day 2 The huge, bustling metropolis of Mexico City is situated at an altitude of around 7400ft (2250m) and is surrounded by cool pine forests which cling to the slopes of the many extinct and active volcanoes. The most famous of these, the mighty Popocatepetl (17,887ft or 5452m) can often be seen smoking threateningly in the far distance. At this time of year bird song enriches the crisp morning air, in marked contrast to the noisy urban bustle of the valley below. Underfoot are thick clumps of bunch grass covering uneven volcanic rock, interspersed

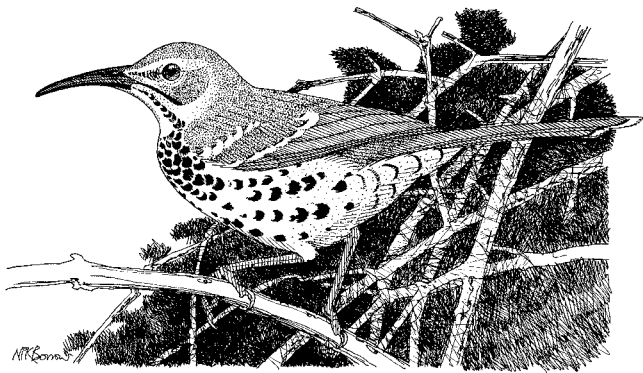
with outcrops of sharp lava, and this is the home of two handsome endemic sparrows. The exceedingly rare Sierra Madre Sparrow is nowadays known only from a small area south of the capital and from an area in distant Durango. The buzzing song is the best clue as to the whereabouts of this small, secretive bird. The pot-bellied Striped Sparrow is a more conspicuous creature, often found in noisy groups, and we shall make a concerted effort to find both of these restricted-range species. A mix of verdant pine-oak forests, brushy thickets and small fertile fields adds to the diversity of this interesting area which is home to several other Mexican specialities. The attractive but often unobtrusive Strickland's Woodpecker is now considered to be endemic to a tiny area of central Mexico, since the splitting off of the more widespread Arizona Woodpecker. The fetching Buff-breasted Flycatcher is the most distinctive member of that nightmare genus *Empidonax*. This group of flycatchers is often considered to be the bane of New World birders, because they can be so difficult to identify. Other regional endemics include White-eared Hummingbird and the attractive Grey Silky. Amongst the many other species we may well

encounter during our time in the area are Black and Turkey Vultures, Broad-billed and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, Northern Flicker (of the red-shafted form), Greater Pewee, Dusky Flycatcher, Horned Lark, Violet-green Swallow, Grey-breasted and Steller's Jays, Mexican Chickadee, Bushtit, Pygmy and White-breasted Nuthatches, Brown Creeper, Brown-throated Wren, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Western Bluebird, American Robin, Curve-billed Thrasher, Hutton's Vireo, Nashville, Townsend's, Hermit and Olive Warblers, Slate-throated Redstart, Blue-hooded Euphonia (usually found in mistletoe), Canyon and Spotted Towhees, Chipping Sparrow, Yellow-eyed Junco, Eastern Meadowlark, the rowdy Great-tailed Grackle, House Finch, Red (or Common) Crossbill and Pine Siskin. We shall also visit a vast reedbed where the endemic Black-pollled Yellowthroat can be found. It is known only from a few marshes in Mexico's central belt, drainage of which now threatens the continuing survival of the species. With luck we will be able to compare its head pattern with that of the Common Yellowthroat, which can also be found here. These once extensive marshes were inhabited by the Slender-billed Grackle, a colonial icterid that was last observed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Unrelenting drainage of the Lerma marshes have led to the extirpation of this reed-loving species. Secretive Soras forage along the reed edges, where Song Sparrows scratch in the soil. Flocks of Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds swoosh over the reeds and amongst them we will try to find Brewer's Blackbird and the localized 'Bicoloured Blackbird'. The latter is usually considered to be a race of the more widespread Red-winged Blackbird, but is a local breeding species that can easily be identified by the lack of a pale border to

the red wing coverts in the male. Other species of the area include Least, Pied-billed and Eared (or Black-necked) Grebes, Great, Snowy and Western Cattle Egrets, Black-crowned Night-Heron, White-faced Ibis, Blue-winged Teal, Mexican Duck, Northern Shoveler, Northern Harrier, Common Moorhen, American Coot, Killdeer, Wilson's Snipe (split from Common), Cassin's Kingbird, Tree, Cliff and Barn Swallows, Marsh Wren and Brown-headed Cowbird.

Day 3 Early this morning we will visit an area of natural arid oak scrub at the edge of Mexico City. Here we will try to locate the endemic Hooded Yellowthroat, which unlike most other members of the genus *Geothlypis* favours dry brushy habitat. Flowering trees and bushes sometimes attract Lucifer Hummingbirds and endemic Abeille's Orioles (until recently considered a race of Bullock's Oriole), and we may also find Inca Dove, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Western Scrub-Jay, Bewick's Wren, the lovely, regional-endemic Rufous-capped Warbler, Rufous-crowned and Black-chinned Sparrows, Northern Cardinal, Bronzed Cowbird and Lesser Goldfinch. Later we will drive southeast to the town of Cordoba for an overnight stay.

Day 4 The area surrounding the town of Cordoba in the state of Veracruz is the centre of Mexico's coffee-growing industry and it is here, on limestone outcrops where coffee is grown under shade trees, that we will hope to locate the rare Sumichrast's (or Slender-billed) Wren. This elusive endemic species is only known from karst outcroppings in central Veracruz and adjoining northern Oaxaca, where it plays hide and seek in the many nooks and crannies of this distinctive habitat. The mournful calls of secretive Thicket Tinamous and the quavering whistles of cautious Singing Quails,



Ocellated Thrasher (Nik Borrow)

both of which are regional endemics, emanate from the forested hills, whilst the loud raucous chatter of Plain Chachalacas betrays the presence of these small cracids. We will keep an eye out for fruiting trees that are often visited by Red-lore Parrots, colourful Keel-billed Toucans, Emerald Toucanets (now restricted to Mexico and northern Central America after taxonomic revision), Collared Aracaris and feisty Montezuma Oropendolas, whilst the regional-endemic Wedge-tailed Sabrewing and White-bellied Emerald flit about in flowering bushes. Other species we hope to find here include White-tipped Dove, the regional-endemic Aztec Parakeet, Squirrel Cuckoo, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, White-collared and Vaux's Swifts, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Blue-crowned Motmot, Golden-fronted and Lineated Woodpeckers, the regional-endemic Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Yellow-olive, Dusky-capped, Boat-billed and Social Flycatchers, Great Kiskadee, Masked Tityra, the vociferous Brown Jay, the handsome Green Jay, Northern House Wren, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Tropical Parula, Magnolia Warbler, American Redstart, Scrub Euphonia and Blue-black Grassquit. In the afternoon we will drive to the bustling little town of Valle Nacional for a three nights stay.

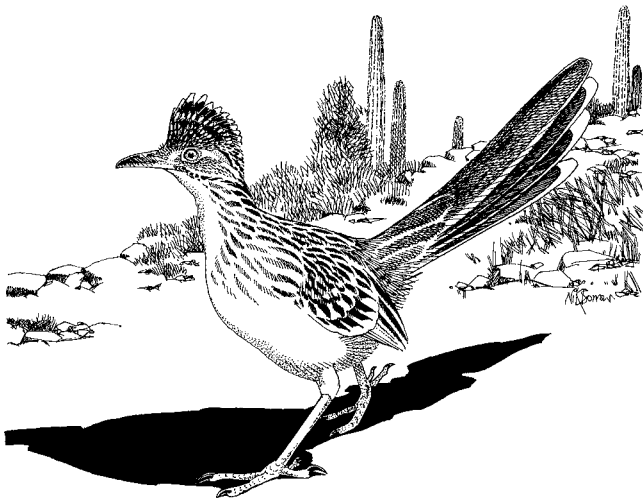
Days 5-6 During these two days we will visit the Atlantic slope of the Sierra de Juarez, where habitats range from lowland and montane rainforests through cloud forest to lovely mixed pine-oak woodland on the higher ridges. As a result of this diversity a wide variety of birds can be expected, but we will of course focus on the Mexican/Central American endemics and specialities. Early in the morning we may flush a shy White-faced Quail-Dove from the roadside or chance upon a secretive White-naped Brush-Finch feeding at the edge of a track. The most characteristic sound of these forests is the ethereal, haunting song of the self-effacing Slate-coloured Solitaire, but finding the songster itself can be quite tricky. The localized Unicoloured Jay is often found in roving bands and we may also find the diminutive Dwarf Jay, which usually associates with family groups of Grey-barred Wrens. Imitating the song of the Central American Pygmy-Owl (a member of the Least Pygmy-Owl complex) often attracts mobbing passerines that may include Yellow-winged Tanager and the enchanting Blue-crowned Chlorophonia (both regional endemics), and hopefully also the owl itself. Tiny regional-endemic Bumblebee, Azure-crowned and Amethyst-throated Hummingbirds, and

Canivet's Emeralds, as well as Berylline Hummingbirds, are attracted to the rich flower banks where we should also encounter regional-endemic Cinnamon-bellied Flower-piercers doing their thing. Other species we hope to find here include such regional endemics as Long-tailed Wood-Partridge, Rufous-breasted Spinetail and the furtive Mexican Anthrush, while other species of more widespread distribution include Little Tinamou, the lovely White Hawk, Roadside and Red-tailed Hawks, Barred Forest-Falcon, American Kestrel, Crested Guan, Brown-hooded and White-crowned Parrots, Striped Cuckoo, Chestnut-collared Swift, Long-tailed Hermit, Stripe-throated Hermit (split from Little), Northern Violaceous Trogon, Smoky-brown and Golden-olive Woodpeckers, Ruddy Foliage-gleaner, Olivaceous, Strong-billed, Spotted and Spot-crowned Woodcreepers, Barred Antshrike, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Tufted, Hammond's, Olive-sided and Piratic Flycatchers, Flammulated Attila (split from Bright-rumped), Tropical Kingbird, the near-endemic Couch's Kingbird, the pretty Rose-throated Becard, Band-backed and Spot-breasted Wrens, noisy but unobtrusive White-breasted and Grey-breasted Wood-Wrens, Long-billed Gnatwren, Black-headed and Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrushes, Hermit, Black, White-throated and Clay-coloured Thrushes, Grey Catbird, Blue-headed, Cassin's and Warbling Vireos, Black-throated Green, Black-and-white, Wilson's and Golden-crowned Warblers, the striking Golden-browed Warbler, Bananaquit, Green and Red-legged Honeycreepers, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, Crimson-collared, White-winged and Blue-grey Tanagers, Buff-throated and Black-headed Saltators, Rose-breasted and Blue Grosbeaks, Black-cowled Oriole and

the retiring Yellow-billed Cacique.

Day 7 After a final look at the Sierra de Juarez we will drive to Oaxaca for a three nights stay.

Days 8-9 One's first impression of Oaxaca is of a pleasant town of airy patios and pink arcades, famous for its Indian markets, surrounded by a desert plain amidst barren mountains. On closer examination we find that this area was once the bed of a vast lake and careful irrigation by the Oaxaqueño farmers led to lush green vegetable and flower fields growing alongside desert cacti and scrub. Above the city clear streams tumble down from pine-clad peaks. The Oaxaca basin and the surrounding uplands are home to some rare and localized species: more Mexican endemics can be found in this area than anywhere else in the country. During our time here we will visit the undisturbed mixed pine-oak forests on Cerro San Felipe, looking for interesting endemics including Mexican Whip-poor-will, the rare Dwarf Jay (which we may have encountered in the Sierra de Juarez, but which is more often observed here), Russet Nightingale-Thrush, Rufous-capped Brush-Finch and the skulking Collared Towhee. In addition we may well encounter Mountain Trogon, Pine Flycatcher, the stunning Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo, the dazzling Crescent-chested Warbler, Black-vented Oriole and Hooded Grosbeak, all of which are restricted to the highland forests of Mexico and northern Central America. The truly exquisite Red Warbler, with its shiny silver cheeks, eclipses even the brightest of its northern cousins and often travels with them in mixed flocks. We will also search an area of dense thorn scrub and oak thickets for such endemics as Dusky and Beautiful Hummingbirds, the rare Pileated Flycatcher, Nutting's Flycatcher, Boucard's



Lesser Roadrunner (Nik Borrow)

Wren, the unusual Ocellated Thrasher, Blue Mockingbird, White-throated Towhee and Oaxaca Sparrow. In a desert area with many candelabra cacti we will find the endemic Grey-breasted Woodpecker and the boldly marked and endearing Bridled Sparrow. Rocky outcrops and inspiring Zapotec ruins are inhabited by curious Canyon and Rock Wrens. A small lake often holds a nice selection of water-loving birds including Ruddy Duck, Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers, Black Phoebe and American Pipit. Other more widespread species we may encounter in this marvellous area include Northern Crested Caracara, Band-tailed Pigeon, Common Ground-Dove, Mourning and White-winged Doves, Groove-billed Ani, the angry-looking Mountain Pygmy-Owl, Magnificent Hummingbird, Acorn and Hairy Woodpeckers, Vermilion and Ash-throated Flycatchers, Western Kingbird, the near-endemic Thick-billed Kingbird, Common Raven, Bridled Titmouse, the strange-sounding, regional-endemic Brown-backed Solitaire, Ruddy-capped Nighthingale-Thrush, Northern Mockingbird, Cedar Waxwing, Loggerhead Shrike, Plumbeous Vireo, Orange-

crowned, Virginia's, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Grey and MacGillivray's Warblers, Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Lark and Lincoln's Sparrows, Scott's and Hooded Orioles, and the near-endemic Audubon's Oriole. If we are fortunate we will even come across the outstanding and highly-prized endemic Aztec Thrush or the unpretentious, regional-endemic Grey-collared Becard.

Day 10 Today we shall leave the highlands behind and descend through the spectacular scenery of the Sierra Madre del Sur to the Pacific coast at Puerto Angel for a two nights stay. In the afternoon we will begin our exploration of the surrounding area.

Day 11 During our time at Puerto Angel we will explore the nearby foothills of the Sierra Madre del Sur where shade coffee groves provide an alternative environment for two endemic and extremely localized hummingbirds: the magnificent Blue-capped (or Oaxaca) Hummingbird and the attractive Cinnamon-sided Hummingbird. Other endemics in this area include Colima Pygmy-Owl, Mexican Hermit, Grey-crowned

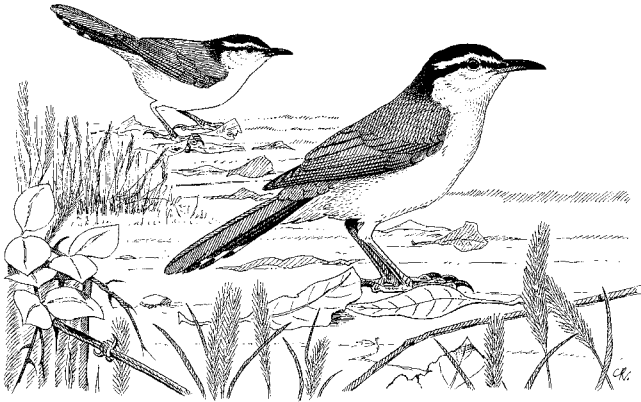
Woodpecker, Happy Wren and Golden Vireo. Additional species we may find today include Cooper's, Broad-winged and Zone-tailed Hawks, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Hepatic-Tanager, Summer Tanager, and Greyish Saltator. Further into the mountains we will explore mixed pine-oak forest where the stunning little White-throated Jay, another extremely localized endemic, can sometimes be found making its way through the forest understorey. We will also take a boat trip offshore in search of seabirds. Pink-footed Shearwater, Black Storm-Petrel, Brown Booby, Brown Pelican and Magnificent Frigatebird are all regularly encountered and with a modicum of luck and the right weather conditions we could encounter the rare endemic Townsend's Shearwater (which breeds on the remote Islas Revillagigedo), Least Storm-Petrel (a Mexican breeding endemic), Nazca Booby (split from Masked), Pomarine Jaeger, flocks of migrating Franklin's Gulls or the smart Sabine's Gull.

Day 12 After some final birding in the Puerto Angel region we will drive east along the Pacific coast to the town of Tehuantepec for an overnight stay.

Day 13 The almost impenetrable, low, xerophytic, thorny scrub near Tehuantepec is home to one of Mexico's most dazzling endemics, the Orange-breasted Bunting, whose shimmering turquoise upperparts, bright yellow-green cap and golden underparts have to be seen to be believed. Known only from this tiny corner of Mexico (just around the Oaxaca-Chiapas state border) is the well marked Sumichrast's (or Cinnamon-tailed) Sparrow, an inveterate skulker inhabiting grassy edges in this restricted habitat. Doubleday's Hummingbird is yet another endemic we

may encounter here amongst the flowering shrubs, whilst more widespread species include the charismatic Lesser Ground-Cuckoo, the enigmatic, regional-endemic Lesser Roadrunner, Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, Grey-breasted Martin, the spectacular White-throated Magpie-Jay, Rufous-naped Wren, White-lored Gnatcatcher, Yellow Warbler, Stripe-headed Sparrow and Streak-backed Oriole. We will then make our way along the windswept Isthmus of Tehuantepec into the nearby hills, where we will search the tangled vegetation of foothill gullies for yet another Mexican gem. Every bit as good as Orange-breasted Bunting, and with a range no bigger than that of Sumichrast's Sparrow, is the fabulous Rosita's Bunting. The male is a vivid blue bird with a shocking pink belly, and seeing, admiring and enjoying this spectacular avian jewel will no doubt be one of the highlights of this tour. The endemic Green-fronted Hummingbird also makes a living here. Raucous screams may reveal the presence of the endemic West Mexican Chachalaca, whilst colourful endemic Citreoline Trogons and Russet-crowned Motmots perch stolidly in the sub-canopy. In the late afternoon we will drive to the small town of Arriaga for a two nights stay.

Day 14 In the varied habitats surrounding the small coastal village of Puerto Arista and the nearby hamlet of Boca de Cielo we will experience the birdiest day of the tour. Mangrove-lined lagoons, a wide sandy shore along the peaceful Pacific Ocean, wide mudflats bordering a meandering tidal arm, extensive groves of small thorny trees, spiny thickets, pastures, fields with brushy edges, copses of mangoes and huge ceibo trees offering shade to the small farms will allow us to notch up a bird list featuring both quality



Giant Wrens (Craig Robson)

and quantity. Before dawn we will be waiting under an impressive kapok tree for the distinctive rather gruff call of the Pacific Screech-Owl and hope to catch this tiny nocturnal critter in the beam of our spotlight. The dawn chorus here is dominated by the loud chattering of regional-endemic White-bellied Chachalacas and the chortling, rollicking song of the Giant Wren. The latter is endemic to a narrow coastal strip of the state of Chiapas, but luckily this impressive bird is quite common here and the noisy and showy family groups are a feature of this area. The White-bellied Chachalaca, here at the extreme western end of its area of distribution, is often hunted and so the birds keep a low profile deep in the thickets after their vociferous morning display is over. Boisterous and flashy regional-endemic Yellow-winged Caciques flit through the flowering trees, where we also hope to see the localized Spot-breasted Oriole. Other species we could find in this non-aquatic habitat include White-tailed and Hook-billed Kites, Sharp-shinned, Grey, Harris's, Crane and White-tailed Hawks, Laughing Falcon, Red-billed Pigeon, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Orange-fronted and Pacific Parakeets, White-fronted Parrot,

Cinnamon Hummingbird, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Least and Brown-crested Flycatchers, the endearing Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Northern Parula, Grey-crowned Yellowthroat, Ovenbird, the exquisite Painted Bunting, White-collared Seedeater, Melodious Blackbird and the attractive Orchard, Altamira and Baltimore Orioles. Later in the morning, when bird activity has ebbed away with the increased heat, we will divert to the nearby coastal lagoons, where a rewarding assortment of waterbirds can be found, including American White Pelican, Neotropic Cormorant, Anhinga, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Great Blue, Little Blue, Tricoloured and Green Herons, Reddish Egret, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork, Osprey, Snail Kite, Northern Jacana, Black-bellied (or Grey), Semipalmated, Snowy and Wilson's Plovers, Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Western and Least Sandpipers, Sanderling, Hudsonian Whimbrel, Marbled Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, Short-billed Dowitcher, Laughing Gull, Gull-billed, Royal, Sandwich, Common and Caspian Terns, Black Skimmer, Ringed, Belted and Green Kingfishers, Mangrove Swallow and

Northern Waterthrush. At dusk Pauragues emit their loud whistles from the woodland edge and Lesser Nighthawks forage high over the pastures.

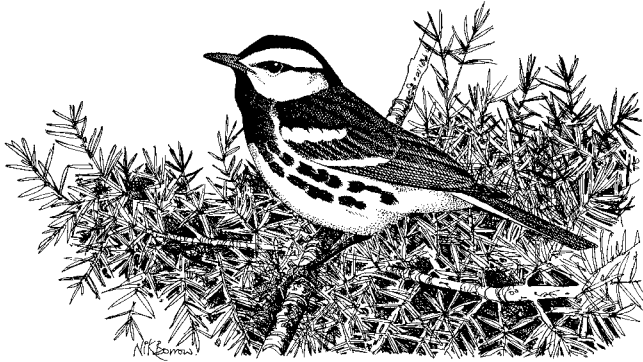
Day 15 After some final birding in the Arriaga area we shall make our way to Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of Chiapas, for a two nights stay.

Day 16 The great canyon of El Sumidero, just north of Tuxtla, is an awe-inspiring sight. As we gaze down at the Rio Grijalva, far below, we may hear the sound of some distant songbird carried up to us by the wind or, if we are lucky, we will see a Short-tailed Hawk join the vultures soaring against the massive cliffs. The main ornithological attractions of the area lie along the road which bisects the woods of the canyon rim. At lower altitude we find bamboo-cloaked dry thorn bush, which changes to evergreen woodland at higher elevations. Rare and localized regional endemics such as the elegant Belted Flycatcher and Bar-winged Oriole can regularly be found here, but most prized of all is the gorgeous endemic Red-breasted Chat. Actually a warbler, a good view of this skulking slate, white and red bird moving quietly through the thorny bush, tail cocked, is ample reward for a persistent search. The handsome, regional-endemic Blue-and-white Mockingbird is another skulker, but fortunately a proud singer, which may well help us find it. The delightful, regional-endemic Fan-tailed Warbler is usually encountered near army ant swarms, where it will feed, undisturbed by our presence, on the insects that have been flushed by the marauding ants. Its intricate tail movements will remind us of Asian fantails. At this time of year the widely-distributed but usually very hard to see Pheasant Cuckoo relentlessly utters its call from the patches of evergreen forest and hopefully we will be able to feast our eyes on

this much-wanted species. Other specialities of the area include the smart Highland Guan (which betrays its presence by its loud whistles), the near-endemic Buff-collared Nightjar and four more regional endemics: the impressive Great Swallow-tailed Swift, the fabulous Slender Sheartail, Ridgway's Rough-winged Swallow and the unobtrusive Flammulated Flycatcher. More widespread species include Northern Bobwhite, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Plain-capped Starthroat, Collared Trogon, Greenish Elaenia, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Cave Swallow, secretive Banded and Plain Wrens, Swainson's Thrush, Tropical Mockingbird, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Tennessee Warbler, Yellow-throated Euphonia, the amazing Yellow Grosbeak, appealing Varied and Blue Buntings, and Olive and Rusty Sparrows.

Day 17 This morning we will visit an area of limestone karst habitat where we stand a good chance of finding the most enigmatic of Mexico's 32 species of wren. The striking Nava's Wren favours bare limestone rocks, pinnacles and small cliffs, infested with an impenetrable tangle of vines and trees. Its beautiful and far-carrying song will lure us inside this amazing habitat where, with a bit of luck, we will be able to admire this little-known endemic at close range as it clammers over rocks before disappearing into its strange environment. Other species we may find here include Grey-headed Dove, the very localized endemic Long-tailed Sabrewing, Stripe-tailed Hummingbird, Blackburnian and Chestnut-sided Warblers, Black-faced Grosbeak and Yellow-faced Grassquit. Later we will drive along a spectacular winding road to the lovely town of San Cristobal de las Casas for a three nights stay in the highlands of Chiapas.

Days 18-19 San Cristobal de



Golden-cheeked Warbler (Nik Borrow)

Las Casas is situated at an altitude of 6900ft (2100m) in a pine-clad mountain valley and was founded in 1528. It exudes a distinctive colonial atmosphere with its arcaded palaces, red-tiled dwellings with charming patios and many old churches. The colourful craftwork markets are famous and the area is inhabited by several Indian tribes with eloquent names like Tenejapan, Chamulan and Zinacanteco. The whole region has long been neglected by the Mexican government and this led to a fierce independence

movement that has come to terms with the Mexican government only relatively recently. There is still a strong military presence in the area. The main habitat here is mixed evergreen pine-oak woodland, interspersed with small fields and brushy flower banks. This habitat is home to a series of exciting regional endemics. Far-carrying low hoots will betray the presence of the shy Blue-throated Motmot, but the prize bird here is the extraordinary Pink-headed Warbler. This near-threatened gem of a

bird is confined to Chiapas and adjoining Guatemala and has recently declined quite dramatically. Rufous-collared Thrushes lead a unassuming existence and the tiny Rufous-browed Wren will call from the dense undergrowth, while if we are in luck we will encounter a group of Black-throated Jays sneaking through the canopy. We will also keep an eye open for Black-capped Swallows, which are often to be seen perched on overhead wires. Mixed warbler flocks sometimes hold rare Golden-cheeked Warblers, which have migrated here from their breeding haunts in central Texas. Birds of wider distribution we are likely to encounter in the San Cristobal area include White-throated Swift, Northern Flicker (of the distinctive Guatemalan race, sometimes split as Guatemalan Flicker), Eastern Bluebird, Mountain Thrush, Common Bush-Tanager, Rufous-collared Sparrow and Black-headed Siskin. If we are really lucky we will find White-breasted Hawk (a member of the Sharp-shinned Hawk complex) or Black-capped Siskin,

both of which are regional endemics. Nocturnal outings may produce goodies like the regional-endemic Bearded Screech-Owl, the responsive Mottled Owl and, if the goddess of birders will allow, the very rarely seen Unspotted Saw-whet Owl.

Day 20 This morning we will reluctantly drive back to Tuxtla Gutierrez and take an afternoon flight to Mexico City, where the tour ends.

Accommodation & Road

Transport: The hotels are of normal Birdquest standard throughout. Road transport is by minibus and roads are mostly good.

Walking: The walking effort is mostly easy to moderate, but there are one or two optional harder walks.

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. It will be rather humid in the lowlands.

Bird Photography:

Opportunities are worthwhile.