

THE YUCATAN PENINSULA

Mexico's Land of the Mayas

Friday 24th February – Tuesday 6th March 2012 (12 days)

Leader: Mark Van Beirs

Group Size Limit: 8

Tour Category: Easy

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. A significant number of these are restricted to the Yucatan Peninsula, most of which lies in Mexico.

During this very easy and highly enjoyable tour we will visit the xerophytic habitats of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. The Yucatan lay at the very centre of the Mayan empire, an empire that extended across a vast area of Central America and which was one of the world's great civilizations. Much about the Mayas is still a mystery and it remains a 'lost' civilization with a very special fascination. The amazing ceremonial temples of this extraordinary empire stand amidst the vast deciduous forests of this limestone peninsula. Alongside these cultural wonders, the Yucatan is known as a holiday destination with well known resorts like Cancun, Playa del Carmen and Cozumel attracting visitors from all over the world.

For birders, the attraction of the Yucatan Peninsula is its rich avifauna and in particular its many endemic species, ranging from the spectacular Ocellated Turkey and the gaudy Yucatan Jay to the pretty little Mexican Sheartail and the gorgeous Orange Oriole. We will visit the eastern side of the huge and rather dry

Yucatan Peninsula and also explore the offshore island of Cozumel. By visiting this part of Mexico we can not only look for every one of the Yucatan endemic specialities but also enjoy one of the finest waterbird sanctuaries in Middle America (at Río Lagartos) and experience for ourselves the extraordinary, world-famous Mayan ruins at Chichén Itzá and Calakmul.

First we will travel to the pleasant island of Cozumel, situated just off the northeastern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula and home to such endemic specialities as Yucatan Parrot, Yucatan Nightjar, Cozumel Emerald, Cozumel Wren and Cozumel Vireo.

Next we will explore the estuaries, lagoons and salt pans of the north coast of the Yucatan at Río Lagartos, enjoying one of the richest sites for waterbirds in all Mexico where highlights will include Bare-throated Tiger Heron, the strange Boat-billed Heron and thousands of American Flamingos, never mind endemics such as Yucatan Bobwhite, Mexican Sheartail, Yucatan Woodpecker and Yucatan Wren.

As we head south across the peninsula we will stop off at Chichén Itzá, the most spectacular of all the Mayan archaeological sites, where we can alternatively marvel at the Pyramid of Kukulcán or at Turquoise-browed Motmots and the endemic White-browed Wren!

Next we will explore the edge of the huge Sian Ka'an Biosphere reserve in Quintana Roo where we will be hoping to find Yucatan Jay, Orange Oriole and Gray-

throated Chat amongst other specialities.

Our final birding will take us to the remote and remarkable Mayan site of Calakmul which is surrounded by a tract of pristine jungle where wacky Ocellated Turkeys wander about unconcernedly. The occurrence of Yucatan Howler and Central American Spider Monkeys testifies to the quality of this area and we should also encounter Great Curassow and Mexican Antthrush.

Birdquest has operated tours to Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula since 1987.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins this evening in the famous resort town of Cancun, situated on the northwest corner of the Yucatan Peninsula, where we will stay overnight.

Day 2 This morning we will take the ferry across to the island of Cozumel for a two nights stay. We will have most of the day to explore the island.

Day 3 Although well known to the Mayas, who called it 'Island of Swallows', little remains of their influence on Cozumel now. A low lying island surrounded by emerald seas and covered in dense scrub and woodland, this was Hernando Cortés's choice of base from which

to launch his conquest of the region. Nowadays Cozumel is very much a tourist resort, although it fortunately lacks the tackiness of the much larger Cancun across the water and remains a pleasant backwater favoured by scuba divers (for its reefs are some of the finest in the Caribbean) and more discerning sun-seekers. For birders Cozumel is a very easy and productive spot, with a mixture of habitats ranging from coastal beaches, lagoons and mangroves to low woodland and large, overgrown pastures. No fewer than four endemic species inhabit the island, and from about September to April many winter visitors from North America are present. During the autumn months, Cozumel has occasionally been struck by hurricanes, as have so many coastal areas in the region. One of these in September 1988 all but wiped out the endemic Cozumel Thrasher. Formerly a common species on the island, we would be very fortunate to encounter one now, although the population is slowly starting to recover. The other endemic birds on the island fared better: Cozumel Emerald, Cozumel Wren and Cozumel Vireo are not uncommon in the shrubby woodlands that cover much of the island. Coastal habitats should turn



up Magnificent Frigatebird and Royal Tern. Inland we will explore the woodland and weedy pastures for Cozumel's endemic birds as well as such Yucatan endemics or regional endemics as Yucatan Parrot, Yucatan Nightjar, Yucatan Flycatcher, Yucatan Vireo and Rose-throated Tanager, and species largely restricted to Caribbean islands such as White-crowned Pigeon, Caribbean Dove, Smooth-billed Ani (if we are in luck), Caribbean Elaenia, Black Catbird and Western Stripe-headed Tanager (or Western Spindalis). We should also encounter Mangrove Cuckoo, Pauraque, Green-breasted Mango, Flammulated Attila (split from Bright-rumped), Brown-crested Flycatcher, Tropical Mockingbird, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Northern Parula, Yellow, Magnolia, Yellow-throated and Palm Warblers, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Common Yellowthroat, Bananaquit, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting and Yellow-faced Grassquit. In an extensive area of marsh we will make a special effort to get good views of the endearing Ruddy Crake (another regional endemic), as well as Grey-crowned Yellowthroat.

Day 4 After some final birding on Cozumel we will return to the mainland and then drive to Río Lagartos on the north coast of the Yucatan Peninsula for a three nights stay. As we head northwards the vegetation becomes drier and more stunted, which is characteristic of the very arid and often windswept northern coast of this huge peninsula.

Days 5-6 The extensive, mangrove-lined estuary and lagoons at Río Lagartos are known as the Ría Lagartos and this area combined with the extensive saltpans at nearby Las Coloradas forms

a paradise for waterbirds. Now well-protected, this is one of the most impressive wetland areas in all Mexico and has become famous for its large flocks of flamingos in particular. The small town of Río Lagartos fronts on to the estuary and some of the local fishermen have turned to guiding visiting birders. At dusk there is a spectacular roost of cormorants, herons, egrets, ibises and spoonbills in the mangroves right opposite the town. Before we relax and enjoy the waterbird spectacle we will track down two endemic species which are restricted to the low scrub along the north coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexican Sheartail and Yucatan Wren. Both are fairly easy to find in this area, as are the more widespread endemic Yucatan Bobwhite and Yucatan Woodpecker. As we explore the farmland with its expanses of native scrub, or wander through some relict forest patches amongst the mangroves, we should also come across Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Crane Hawk, Common Black-Hawk, Northern Crested-Caracara, Killdeer, Common Ground-Dove, Aztec Parakeet, Lesser Roadrunner, Cinnamon Hummingbird, Least and Vermilion Flycatchers, Tree Swallow, Mangrove Vireo, Scrub Euphonia, Northern Cardinal, Blue-black Grassquit, Red-winged and Melodious Blackbirds and Altamira Oriole.

The huge saltpans at Las Coloradas offer great birding. Several thousand American Flamingoes can be found here, and if we come across a big gathering the shimmering pink mass and regular lines of new arrivals fighting in will create quite an impression. Along the sandy shoreline we will come across many Brown Pelicans, joining the gulls to see if there are titbits to pick up as the local fishermen

bring their catches ashore. Laughing and American Herring Gulls are numerous, and there are often one or two Kelp Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls present in the area, while Sandwich Terns patrol just off the beach. Rather surprisingly, Zenaída Doves seem to love the beach area. This Caribbean island speciality only reaches the mainland in this part of Mexico. As we wander around the saltpans flocks of Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants will fly past and we will come across a splendid variety of shorebirds including Snowy (split from Kentish) and Semipalmated Plovers, American Oystercatcher, Black-necked Stilt, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Dunlin, Spotted, Semipalmated, Western, Least and Stilt Sandpipers, and Short-billed Dowitcher. Ospreys, Caspian Terns and Forster's Terns fish in the lagoons, Gull-billed Terns hunt for large insects and from time to time a wintering Peregrine Falcon puts the shorebird flocks to flight.

A highlight of our visit will be our boat trip on the Ría Lagartos itself. As we leave the town we could see American White Pelicans fishing in the wider reaches of the estuary, bizarre Black Skimmers resting on a sandbar and Mangrove Swallows hawking insects over the waters. As the estuary narrows we will start to explore the mangrove-lined fringes and even make our way up narrow channels roofed over by encroaching mangroves. The star attractions of these jungle-like waterways are the large but secretive Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and the strange, prehistoric-looking Boat-billed Heron (often considered a monotypic family). The former is impressive enough (especially as we may well get very close in our boat,

as the waterbirds here are often unafraid), but the latter, as it stares down on us with those enormous black eyes positioned over that incredible bill, is one of those birds that one remembers forever! Here too we can expect to see Great Blue, Little Blue, Tricoloured and Green Herons, Great, Snowy and Reddish Egrets, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, White Ibis and the lovely Roseate Spoonbill. The localized Rufous-necked Wood-Rail occurs in these mangroves, but we will think ourselves extremely lucky if we come across this uncommon and shy bird.

Day 7 Today we will set off early so that we can make a stop at the famous archaeological site of Chichén Itzá before it gets too hot and crowded. Chichén Itzá is the most famous, best preserved and most visited Mayan site in Central America, and for good reason: this is one of those world-class archaeological sites that even the most focussed birders are impressed by! Chichén Itzá reached the zenith of its power and wealth between 800-1000 AD before being abandoned in the 14th century. Dominating the huge plaza is the impressive Pyramid of Kukulcán (also known as El Castillo), which is built with 91 steps on each side, and a single step at the main entrance to the temple on its summit platform, making a total of 365, exactly the same as the number of days in a year. It is well worth the rather steep climb up to the top to enjoy the staggering view across the plaza and far, far away across the dry woodlands of the Yucatan. Going down again is not so easy (that drop of 91 steps looks a long way!), and most people like to hold on to the rope helpfully provided by the authorities. We will have time to see some of the other buildings as well, notably

the strange 'Ball-Court'. The rules of the game, and its purpose, remain obscure, but certainly at some period in the city's history they seemed to involve the human sacrifice of either the losing or the winning team, or at least their captain! The site is also a good place to find Turquoise-browed Motmot and the endemic White-browed Wren. After our visit to this wonderful place we will continue southwards to Felipe Carrillo Puerto for a two nights stay. We will arrive in time for some initial exploration.

Day 8 Felipe Carrillo Puerto is situated not far from the huge Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve and we shall bird along the excellent access road to the reserve, which passes through a large tract of primary and secondary forest, with varying levels of human disturbance. Early in the morning we should come across Plain Chachalacas calling from high in the trees as White-fronted Parrots noisily flight out from their roosts and big Black-headed Saltators create a cacophony of sound. As we wander along the road, enjoying the easy birding conditions it provides, we will be looking out in particular for the endemic Yucatan Jay and Orange Oriole and regional endemics such as Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, White-bellied Emerald and the stunning little Grey-throated Chat. Other birds likely to be seen in this rewarding area include Roadside Hawk, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Black-headed Trogon, Lineated Woodpecker, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Tropical Pewee, Great Kiskadee, Couch's Kingbird, Rose-throated Becard, Brown Jay, Spot-breasted Wren, Grey Catbird, White-eyed Vireo, Lesser Greenlet, the handsome Blue Bunting, White-collared Seedeater, Orchard and Hooded Orioles, and the striking

Yellow-backed Oriole. After dark we can look for the rather elusive endemic Yucatan Poorwill.

Day 9 After some final birding in the Felipe Carrillo Puerto area, we will drive to the well preserved archeological site of Calakmul for a three nights stay.

Days 10-11 The famous Mayan site of Calakmul was discovered by biologist Cyrus Lundell in 1931 and is situated in the 2800 square mile (7200 square km) Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in the Mexican state of Campeche, deep in the jungles of the greater Petén Basin region, about 18 miles (30km) from the Guatemalan border. Calakmul, the 'City of the Two Adjacent Pyramids', was a major Maya superpower within the northern Petén region. An amazing 6,750 ancient structures have been identified, the largest of which is the great pyramid at the site. It is estimated to have had a population of 50,000 people in its halcyon days. The Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, the largest tropical forest reserve in Mexico, is a treasure trove of Mayan history in the heart of the Maya Forest and our visit will be one of the highlights of the tour. The remarkable Ocellated Turkey is commonly encountered and single birds or even parties often almost block the entrance road. This close relative of the better known North American Wild Turkey only occurs in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico and adjacent Guatemala and Belize. In most of its range this species has become very wary due to hunting, but here these spectacular bird have become totally fearless. Another major target is the delightful Great Curassow, widely hunted elsewhere, but still fairly tame here. The males display their unique curly hairdo and

two different morphs of the females will be encountered. As dawn breaks and the forest awakens one of the first birds to become active is the impressive Strong-billed Woodcreeper whose calls permeate the gloom of first light and give us our best chance to track down this rather elusive bird. Blue-crowned Motmots follow close behind and flocks of Yellow-lored Parrots vocalize from the huge trees surrounding the plaza. Bat Falcons hunt from exposed perches and sometimes the elusive Collared Forest-Falcon splits the air with its early morning calls. Fruiting trees around the ruins often attract huge Crested Guans, colourful Slaty-tailed Trogons, Emerald Toucanets, Collared Aracaris, Keel-billed Toucans, Masked Tityras, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, gorgeous Black-cowled and Baltimore Orioles, and flocks of Olive-backed Euphonias. One particularly large tree contains numerous huge, pendulous nests of the superb Montezuma Oropendola, a species which is hard to miss due to its complex calls and the unusual upside down display of the male! The large red flowers of exotic African Tulip Trees host a variety of hummingbirds including Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, White-necked Jacobin and sometimes large numbers of dazzling Purple-crowned Fairies. The entrance road to the ruins passes through untouched primary forest providing some very productive early morning birding. Roadside ginger and heliconias attract Stripe-throated and Long-billed Hermits and Blue-black Grosbeaks sing their sad songs from the concealment of the bushes. Overhead, the huge forest trees are inhabited by Northern Violaceous Trogons, Black-cheeked Woodpecker and the huge Pale-billed Woodpecker (whose 'double

knock' drum will soon become a familiar sound). Unobtrusive Short-billed Pigeons feed on ripening Cecropia fruit. Above the canopy, Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts wheel around and as the sun warms the air raptors make an appearance, sometimes including the stunning White Hawk. Colourful and extremely vocal Rufous-tailed Jacamars are usually easy to find and tiny White-breasted Wood-Wrens skulk around the roots of fallen trees, uttering their beautiful song, while other forest inhabitants include Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet and the secretive Green-backed Sparrow. Shy Mexican Antthrushes (a regional endemic) creep around on the forest floor while flocks of Black-faced Grosbeaks, regional-endemic Yellow-winged Tanagers usually keep to the treetops. The calls of regional-endemic Black-throated Shrike-Tanagers herald the approach of mixed species flocks, which often contain Long-billed Gnatwrens, Tawny-crowned Greenlets and Golden-hooded Tanagers. If we are particularly lucky we will find an army ant swarm with its attendant followers. The birds are often so engrossed in taking insects flushed by the marauding ants that they are oblivious to observers and allow a close approach. The most usual species found at these events include Ivory-billed, Tawny-winged, Ruddy and Northern Barred Woodcreepers, sombre-coloured Plain Antvireos, striking Grey-headed Tanagers and both Red-crowned and Red-throated Ant-Tanagers. The forest is also teeming with a wide array of tyrant-flycatchers which include the striking Northern Royal-Flycatcher, Eye-ringed Flatbill, Greenish Elaenia and Sepia-capped, Sulphur-rumped and Ruddy-tailed Flycatchers. At this season there are also good

numbers of winter visitors from further north including Yellow-bellied and Great Crested Flycatchers, Wood Thrush, Red-eyed and Philadelphia Vireos, Blue-winged, Kentucky and Hooded Warblers, and Louisiana Waterthrush.

Groups of Yucatan Black Howler and agile Central American Spider Monkeys are regular visitors to the fruiting trees near the plaza.

Day 12 Today we will return to Cancun where the tour ends around midday.

Accommodation & Road

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

Walking: The walking effort is easy throughout.

Climate: Generally warm or hot, dry and sunny. Whilst overcast weather is quite regular, rain is infrequent at this season. It will be fairly humid at times.

Bird Photography: Opportunities are quite good.