

# Acapulco to Veracruz – home to Mexico’s better endemics!

Raymond Jeffers

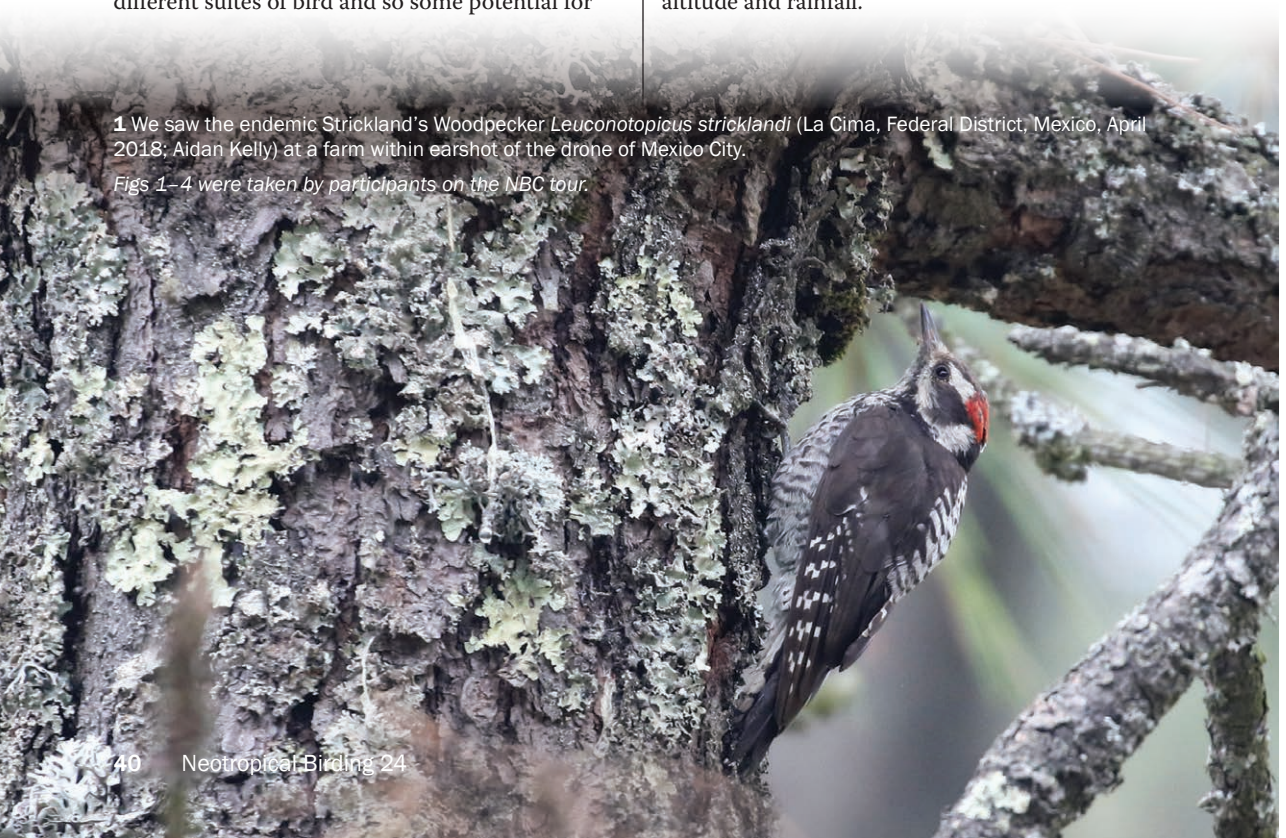
*This report on the Club’s latest fundraiser trip in April 2018 suggests that birding in Mexico is not as you might have expected... For a start, we ‘marketed’ the tour as following one of ‘North America’s finest birding routes’. Yes, you did read that correctly: North America. For while the Club refers to its region as lying from ‘Middle’ America southwards, Mexico is also within North America according to most geographical definitions. Whatever, the route followed was undoubtedly one of the finest around. Travelling 1,000 km over 15 days, tour participants recorded 60 Mexican endemic species, 40 additional taxa endemic to Mexico and 33 regional endemics among a trip list of 475. The tour raised \$6,000 for Neotropical bird conservation.*

If you peruse a map of central Mexico it becomes readily apparent that the most striking topographical feature of the country is a series of mountains with sea on either side. To the eye of a birder this looks like three distinctive birding habitats: Pacific slope, montane region and Caribbean slope. In turn that suggests three different suites of bird and so some potential for

endemism. However, when ‘on the ground’ it becomes obvious that the geographical picture is a little more complicated. For example, not only are there coastal areas with grassland, savanna and rocky islands (hosting seabird colonies) but also habitat in the montane region varies significantly from dry scrub to lush forest in relation with altitude and rainfall.

**1** We saw the endemic Strickland’s Woodpecker *Leuconotopicus stricklandi* (La Cima, Federal District, Mexico, April 2018; Aidan Kelly) at a farm within earshot of the drone of Mexico City.

*Figs 1–4 were taken by participants on the NBC tour.*





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2 Short-crested Coquette *Lophornis brachylophus* (Sierra Madre del Sur, Guerrero, Mexico, April 2018; Aidan Kelly). This Critically Endangered endemic was a tour highlight.



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3 We had close views of Mexican Duck *Anas diazi* at UNAM Botanical Garden, Mexico City, April 2018 (Bill Moorhead).

Michael Carmody of Legacy Tours designed the NBC route to maximise hitting all these areas. Accordingly, the trip was essentially a transect across central Mexico from west to east. The itinerary was in such demand that two tours were run; this report describes the first (8–23 April 2018). To simplify matters let's divide the trip into four: the Pacific coastal strip west of Acapulco; the mountains of Sierra Madre del Sur and Sierra Madre de Guerrero; the interior; and the coastal wetlands near Veracruz. Under Michael's expert birding guidance and benefiting from his decades of experience in Mexico, the seven NBC participants were to cover numerous sites, see all the realistic targets, encounter bird conservation in action and enjoy Mexican hospitality every night!

Throughout this account, we use <sup>E</sup> to denote a taxon endemic to Mexico. Meanwhile, <sup>RE</sup> indicates a 'regionally endemic' taxon that occurs only in Mexico, the borderlands of the United States or northern Central America (north of Costa Rica).

## Peaceful Pacific

Starting in the west we flew into the holiday zone of Ixtapa–Zihuantenajo, a stone's throw from Acapulco. From the air we could see sandy beaches, coastal lagoons, freshwater marshes and dry forest below clear blue skies. This augured well for our two full days allotted to 'Pacific birds'. Eschewing the recreational facilities on offer at our smart beach-side hotel, we started birding immediately in the company of Michael and our Mexican host, local birder, driver and man for all seasons, David Salas. In woodland beyond the hotel fence, our first endemics soon popped up West Mexican Chachalaca *Ortalis poliocephala*<sup>E</sup>, Citreoline Trogon *Trogon citreolus*<sup>E</sup>, Golden-cheeked Woodpecker *Melanerpes chrysogenys*<sup>E</sup> and Sclater's Wren *Campylorhynchus humilis*<sup>E</sup>. Next

into the notebook was a portentous male Black-and-white Warbler *Mniotilta varia*. A spectacle of Mexico at this time of year is the presence of North American passerines. By the time we flew out of Veracruz our total of logged New World warblers (Parulidae) was 32!

The next two full birding days were hot (in two senses of the word). On the first day and under the baking sun, our explorations took in beach, lagoon, estuary and woodland around Troncones plus a well-earned break at the Inn at Manzanillo Bay. The latter was, of course, devoted to studying, in the car park no less, an interesting subspecies of Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis carneus* – known by some as 'Long-crested Cardinal' and a potential endemic species. Indeed, Mexico would seem to be nirvana for 'splitters'. Take, for example, the following septet of subspecies that we saw: Squirrel Cuckoo *Piaya cayana mexicana*<sup>E</sup>; Scrub Euphonia *Euphonia affinis godmani*<sup>E</sup>; Tropical Parula *Setophaga pitiayumi pulchra*<sup>E</sup>; White-bellied Wren *Uropsila leucogastra pacifica*<sup>E</sup>; Stripe-headed Sparrow *Peucaea ruficauda acuminata*<sup>E</sup>; White-collared Seedeater *Sporophila torqueola torqueola*<sup>E</sup>; and Blue Bunting *Cyanocompsa parellina indigotica*<sup>E</sup>.

The following day centred on the playground of Playa Linda but we escaped the madding crowds for a mini-pelagic that brought Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*, Blue-footed Booby *Sula nebouxii*, Masked Booby *S. dactylatra* and, rare for here, Heermann's Gull *Larus heermanni*. For the afternoon we lingered at the restful El Refugio de Potosi. Coming to the feeders were an array of 'hummers' glistening in the sunlight including Golden-crowned Emerald *Chlorostilbon auriceps*<sup>E</sup>; Plain-capped Starthroat *Heliomaster constantii*; and Doubleday's *Cyanthus doubledayi*<sup>E</sup>, Cinnamon *Amazilia rutila*, Ruby-



4 The Brigado de Moneterio of San Miguel Topilejo, with tour participants (La Cima, Federal District, Mexico, April 2018; Raymond Jeffers).

throated *Archilochus colubris* and Black-chinned *A. alexandri* hummingbirds. Naturally our haul incorporated endemics such as Colima Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium palmarum*<sup>E</sup>; Golden-cheeked Woodpecker *Melanerpes chrysogenys*<sup>E</sup>; Flammulated Flycatcher *Deltarhynchus flammulatus*<sup>E</sup>; Golden Vireo *Vireo hypochryseus*<sup>E</sup>; Happy Phuegopedius *felix*<sup>E</sup> and Sinaloa *Thryophilus sinaloa*<sup>E</sup> wrens; Rufous-backed Thrush *Turdus rufopalliatus*<sup>E</sup>; Red-breasted Chat *Granatellus venustus*<sup>E</sup> and Yellow Grosbeak *Pheucticus chrysopeplus*<sup>E</sup>. Regional endemics also kept flowing with Yellow-headed Parrot *Amazona oratrix*<sup>RE</sup>, Yellow-winged (or Mexican) Cacique *Cassiculus melanicterus*<sup>RE</sup> and Black-vented Oriole *Icterus wagleri*<sup>RE</sup>.

## Up hill and down dale

A short way from the coast the land rises gently into undulating mountains. Michael's plan was simple. Based in the small town of Atoyac de Alvarez we would take a winding road that accesses the lower, middle and upper elevations of Sierra Madre del Sur. After that we would move to the livelier town of Chilpancingo. This would afford us the opportunity to work the interior slopes of the Sierra Madre de Guerrero. We had five full days here and the reason for this became obvious: the mountains are rich in birds!

The avifauna swells at this time of year with many flycatchers and warblers from North

America. It was almost impossible for us to keep pace with the bird flocks. We 'enjoyed' the challenge of confusing 'Empid' (*Empidonax*) flycatchers testing our identification skills to the limit. After some debate we were confident that we had correctly(!) identified Willow *Empidonax traillii*, White-throated *E. albigularis*, Least *E. minimus*, Hammond's *E. hammondi*, Dusky *E. oberholseri*, American Grey *E. wrightii*, Pine *E. affinis*<sup>RE</sup>, Pacific-slope *E. difficilis*, Cordilleran *E. occidentalis* and Buff-breasted *E. fulvifrons* flycatchers. Thankfully identifying the colourful 'Western' wood warblers present was less stressful (at least when they had the decency to stop disappearing around the back of big leaves). We noted Ovenbird *Seiurus aurocapilla*, Louisiana *Parkesia motacilla* and Northern *P. noveboracensis* waterthrushes; Yellow-breasted Chat *Icteria virens*; American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla* and Northern Parula *S. americana*; plus Orange-crowned *Oreothlypis celata*, Nashville *O. ruficapilla*, Virginia's *O. virginiae*, MacGillivray's *Geothlypis tolmiei*, Magnolia *S. magnolia*, Audubon's *S. auduboni*, Black-throated Grey *S. nigrescens*, Townsend's *S. townsendi*, Hermit *S. occidentalis* and Black-throated Green *S. virens* warblers. Plus, to give our Parulidae list an authentic Middle American flavour we seasoned it with Red *Cardellina rubra*<sup>E</sup>, Red-faced *C. rubrifrons*<sup>RE</sup>, Rufous-capped *Basileuterus rufifrons* and Golden-crowned *B. belli* warblers together



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Figs 5–15 were all taken in (the country of) Mexico, albeit not on the NBC tour.

**5** West Mexican Chachalaca *Ortalis poliocephala* (Reserva de las Biosfera Chamela-Cuixmala, Jalisco, August 2018; Daniel J. Field) is endemic to the deciduous forests of southwest Mexico.

**6** Colima Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium palmarum*, Tangolunda, Huatulco, Oaxaca, March 2017 (Steven Huggins) This newly recognised species (formerly lumped with Least Pygmy-Owl *G. minutissimum*) is endemic to Mexico.

**7** Balsas Screech-Owl *Megascops seductus*, Xochicalco, Morelos, March 2017 (Steven Huggins). Other than Colima Pygmy-Owl, this is the only owl endemic to Mexico.

with Painted *Myioborus pictus* and Slate-throated *M. miniatus* whitestarts.

Starting with the Sierra Madre del Sur we were barely out of Atoyac before peering through branches to glimpse a static Lesser Ground Cuckoo *Morococcyx erythropygus*. There were plenty of other delights: Singing Quail *Dactylortyx thoracicus*<sup>RE</sup>, White-faced Quail-Dove *Zenaidura macroura*<sup>E</sup>, Mexican Hermit *Phaethornis mexicanus*<sup>E</sup>, Mexican Violetear *Colibri thalassinus*<sup>RE</sup>, White-tailed Hummingbird *Eupherusa poliocerca*<sup>E</sup>, Wagler's Toucanet *Aulacorhynchus wagleri*<sup>E</sup>, Grey-crowned Woodpecker *Colaptes auricularis*<sup>E</sup>, Lilac-crowned Parrot *Amazona finschi*<sup>E</sup>, Northern Barred-Woodcreeper *Dendrocolaptes sanctithomae* of the endemic race *sheffleri*<sup>E</sup>, Unicoloured Jay *Apelocoma unicolor*<sup>RE</sup>, Cinnamon-bellied



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
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**8** Blue Mockingbird *Melanotis caerulescens*, Volcan de Fuego, Jalisco, April 2015 (Nigel Voaden;  flickr.com/photos/nvoaden) Although fairly common, it is both endemic and stunning.

**9** Golden Vireo *Vireo hypochryseus*, Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, March 2015 (Nigel Voaden;  flickr.com/photos/nvoaden). Endemic to western Mexico, this vireo occurs in three subspecies from southern Sonora south to Oaxaca.

**10** Grey Silky-Flycatcher *Ptiliogonys cinereus*, Teotitlan del Valle, Oaxaca, March 2015 (Nigel Voaden;  flickr.com/photos/nvoaden). Although not quite endemic to Mexico, as it edges into Guatemala, it still counts as a 'regional endemic', of course...



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Flowerpiercer *Diglossa baritula*<sup>RE</sup> and Red-headed Tanager *Piranga erythrocephala*<sup>E</sup>. And if that was not enough we truly hit the jackpot with multiple views of a very special and globally Critically Endangered hummer: Short-crested Coquette *Lophornis brachylophus*<sup>E</sup>. This finger-size sprite, whose ecology appears to be largely unknown, was staked out by Michael on one of his many scouting trips. If it is only in this area, then with this gem's environment under threat from cultivation and logging one can only fear for its survival.

To the human eye 'de Guerrero' looked rather similar to 'del Sur' albeit a little drier and so scrubbier. Yet for the birds it must be significantly different as again new special creatures kept coming. The lower slopes held Great Swallow-tailed Swift *Panyptila sanctihieronymi*<sup>RE</sup>, Dusky Hummingbird *Cyananthus sordidus*<sup>E</sup>, Grey-breasted Woodpecker *Melanerpes hypopolius*<sup>E</sup>, Pileated Flycatcher *Xenotriccus mexicanus*<sup>E</sup>, Boucard's Wren *Campylorhynchus jocosus*<sup>E</sup>, Blue Mockingbird *Melanotis caerulescens*<sup>E</sup>, Grey Silky-flycatcher *Ptiliogonys cinereus*<sup>RE</sup> and Rusty-



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**11** Black-pollled Yellowthroat *Geothlypis speciosa*, Cienega de Lerma, México City, March 2017 (Steven Huggins). This Endangered species is restricted to extensive marshes in just four areas of central Mexico, encompassing the states of Guanajuato, Michoacán and México.

crowned Ground-Sparrow *Melospiza kieneri*<sup>E</sup>. On the upper slopes we found Garnet-throated Hummingbird *Lamprolaima rhami*<sup>RE</sup>, Mountain Trogon *Trogon mexicanus*<sup>RE</sup>, White-striped Woodcreeper *Lepidocolaptes leucogaster*<sup>E</sup>, Slaty Vireo *Vireo brevipennis*<sup>E</sup>, Russet-Nightingale-Thrush *Catharus occidentalis*<sup>E</sup>, Black Thrush *Turdus infuscatus*<sup>RE</sup> and Black-headed Siskin *Spinus notatus*<sup>RE</sup>. However, the stand-out bird without question was a Long-tailed Wood-Partridge *Dendrortyx macroura*<sup>E</sup>. Remarkably it was viewed in flight; albeit one that was very low and not for long!

## Interior design

Between the Sierra Madre and the Caribbean, the terrain is predominantly a heavily cultivated and populated flat plateau. Thus, at first blush, your instinct is that the birds here will not be commonplace. However, nothing could be further from the truth! Michael had designed five days of intense birding for us along a route that was roughly due north from the city of Chilpancingo to the south of Mexico City and then due east to the edge of the Sierra Madre de Occidental before it drops down to the Caribbean coastal plain. The reason being the high level of endemism within two distinctive geographical features – the Balsas drainage and the Transvolcanic belt. This offered up marshes, lakes, scrub, bunch grass and woods

of pine, oak or fir. For those who desire quantity in their birding this was the place to be.

Here we began recording grebes (Pied-billed *Podilymbus podiceps*, Western *Aechmophorus occidentalis* and Clark's *A. clarkii*), rails (Sora *Porzana Carolina*, Virginia *Rallus limicola* and heard-only Aztec *R. tenuirostris*<sup>E</sup>), American Bushtit of the 'Black-eared' type *Psaltiriparus minimus melanotis*<sup>RE</sup>, Pygmy Nuthatch *Sitta pygmaea*, Brown Creeper *Certhia amerciana*, Curve-billed Thrasher *Toxostoma curvirostre*, our first bluebirds (Eastern *Sialia sialis* and Western *S. mexicana*), Grey-collared Becard *Pachyrhamphus major*<sup>RE</sup>, Black-pollled Yellowthroat *Geothlypis speciosa*<sup>E</sup> (Endangered), new Icterids (Yellow-headed Blackbird *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*, Scott's Oriole *Icterus parisorum*, Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*<sup>E</sup>, – here represented by the *gubernator* group, known as 'Mexican Bicoloured Blackbird' – and Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater*) plus more sparrow-types (Black-chinned *Spizella atrogularis*, Black-chested *Peucaea humeralis*<sup>E</sup>, Botteri's *P. botterii* and Striped *Oriturus superciliosus*<sup>E</sup> sparrows, with Green-striped *Arremon virenticeps*<sup>E</sup> and Rufous-capped *Atlapetes pileatus*<sup>E</sup> brushfinches). For those who like their birding spiced with taxonomic controversy, Michael introduced us to the Spotted Towhee *Pipilo maculatus* debate. He drew our attention to a towhee with an olive-back. This is of the race *macronyx*<sup>E</sup>. There is surely a cogent case for this being another Mexican endemic species, logically 'Olive-backed Towhee'!

Inevitably a few experiences in the interior stood out. Incredible views of a covey of Banded Quail *Philortyx fasciatus*<sup>E</sup> at Laguna Tuxpan near Iguala was one. So too burning the candle at both ends with pre-dawn Balsas Screech-owl *Megascops seductus*<sup>E</sup> and Buff-collared Nightjar *Antrostomus ridgwayi* then a post-dusk high-flying Sinaloa Martin *Progne sinaloe*<sup>E</sup> above Taxco. Also, on the shortlist was an early-morning, commuter-avoiding dash into the botanical gardens of Mexico City's national university for one regional and two Mexican endemics: Mexican Duck *Anas diazi*<sup>RE</sup>; Hooded Yellowthroat *Geothlypis nelsoni*<sup>E</sup>; and Black-backed Oriole *Icterus abeillei*<sup>E</sup>. However, the best day in the interior was surely when we rushed around the Transvolcanic belt, within earshot of the drone of Mexico's capital, seeing Transvolcanic Jay *Aphelocoma ultramarina*<sup>E</sup> in a car park, followed by Strickland's Woodpecker *Leuconotopicus stricklandi*<sup>E</sup> at a farm collective, Sierra Madre Sparrow *Xenospiza baileyi*<sup>E</sup> (Endangered) in grassland and finally (at dusk from



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**12 Red Warbler**

*Cardellina rubra*, Barranca Rancho Liebre, Sinaloa, April 2015 (Nigel Voaden; [flickr.com/photos/nvoaden/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nvoaden/)). A striking montane specialist – and Mexican endemic.

**13 Sierra Madre Sparrow** *Xenospiza baileyi*, México City, February 2017 (Carl Glometti). We saw this Endangered songbird in the grasslands of the Transvolcanic belt.

**14 Rufous-capped Brushfinch** Barranca Rancho Liebre, Sinaloa, April 2015 (Nigel Voaden; [flickr.com/photos/nvoaden/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nvoaden/)). A fairly common endemic of the highlands (900–3,500 m) of northern and central Mexico.

parted the best of friends. We will forever cherish the time we spent with those on the front line of bird conservation in San Miguel Topilejo.

## Veracruz farewell

Our last few days combined a gentle descent from the Sierra Madre de Occidental east of Mexico City with a rapid ascent in the rate at which birds were being encountered as we neared the Caribbean plain west of the port of Veracruz. Having experienced the dry heat of the Pacific slope and the relative coolness of the Transvolcanic belt, we were now into humid territory. So, no surprise we found our first antbird (Barred Antshrike *Thamnophilus doliatus*) and a dainty Common Tody-Flycatcher *Todirostrum cinereum*. Although much of this area has been cleared for grazing and some coffee plantations there is still some good habitat. This ranges from foothill woodlands of the Sierra Madre to grassy savannas by the coast.

Typical birds of the woodlands for us near Coatepec were Azure-crowned Hummingbird

a rooftop bar) scanning the skies for White-naped Swift *Streptoprocne semicollaris*<sup>E</sup>.

The Sierra Madre Sparrow excursion involved our most humbling experience of the trip. As we walked a track a ‘brigade’ approached the group. This was no military unit but ‘Brigado de Moneterio’, a crack squad of local people devoted to saving the sparrow. After David explained in Spanish what we were up to and the mission of the NBC, stern looks switched to broad smiles. Obligatory photos with the brigade followed as they related their work with justifiable pride. We



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**15** Townsend's Warbler *Setophaga townsendi*, Volcan de Fuego, Jalisco, April 2015 (Nigel Voaden; [flickr.com/photos/nvoaden](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nvoaden)). Breeds in western North America, wintering south through Mexico into Panama.

**16** Red-headed Tanager *Piranga erythrocephala*, Reserva Chara Pinta, Sinaloa, April 2015 (Nigel Voaden; [flickr.com/photos/nvoaden](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nvoaden)). Endemic to the mountains of western Mexico.

*Amazilia cyanocephala*<sup>RE</sup>, Gartered Trogon *Trogon caligatus*, Blue-capped Motmot *Momotus coeruleiceps*<sup>E</sup>, Bronze-winged Woodpecker *Colaptes aeruginosus*<sup>E</sup>, White-naped Brushfinch *Atlapetes albinucha* and Rusty Sparrow *Aimophila rufescens*<sup>RE</sup>. As for the savanna, we welcomed seeing Double-striped Thick-knee *Burhinus bistriatus*, Plain-breasted Ground Dove *Columbina minuta*, Aplomado Falcon *Falco femoralis*, Rufous-naped Wren *Campylorhynchus rufinucha*<sup>E</sup>, and both Altamira *Icterus gularis* and Ochre *I. fuertesi*<sup>E</sup> orioles. You will have spotted that this includes yet more endemic species but also our run of interesting *subspecies* continued with (the Near Threatened) Northern Bobwhite *Colinus virginianus pectoralis*<sup>RE</sup> (this version having cinnamon-rufous underparts and a broad black chestband), Squirrel Cuckoo *Piaya cayana thermophila* (darker above than the *mexicana* on the Pacific slope), Warbling Vireo *Vireo gilvus gilvus*, Tropical Parula *Setophaga pitiayumi nigrilora*<sup>RE</sup>, Grey-barred Wren *Campylorhynchus megalopterus nelsoni*<sup>E</sup> and Common Bush Tanager *Chlorospingus flavopectus ophthalmicus*<sup>RE</sup>.

The final leg of our trip had been as distinctive as the previous three with several particularly special moments. There was our hunt for one more New World Quail (Odontophoridae). After some inspired on-the-spot planning by Michael we saw (albeit with the naked eye!) Bearded Wood-Partridge *Dendrortyx barbatus*<sup>E</sup> (Vulnerable). Understandably, alongside our earlier viewing of Long-tailed Partridge, for some this was the highlight of the trip. And yet one further encounter ranked almost as high. Our final location was Alvarado wetlands close to Veracruz airport and our departure point for

home. Here as we surveyed the swaying grasses the head and neck of a Pinnated Bittern *Botaurus pinnatus* suddenly appeared. Magic! A great way to complete what is surely one of the finest birding routes in North America.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This fundraiser would not have been possible but for two people: David Salas of Fronteras de Ecoturismo and Michael Carmody of Legacy Tours. David kept the group on the straight and narrow. As for Michael, as John Cleese of *Monty Python* fame might have said, the trip was 'designed, written and performed' by Michael. He is truly something completely different. Neither the sums NBC raised nor the joy of the trip would have been possible without his leadership, peerless knowledge of Mexico's avifauna, attention to every detail and sandwich-making skills.

Thanks also to: William and staff at Manzanillo Bay for birds and lunch; Laurel for showing us around the wonderful El Refugio de Potosi and allowing us to use her viewing tower; and members of the Brigado de Moniterio (David Aguilar Bravo, Jacinto Martínez Pérez, Cecilia Flores Arena and Ana Karen Manzaneros Flores) for their sterling work in bird conservation. Many thanks to all 12 participants for assisting the NBC in raising so much for the Club's conservation efforts and especially my six stoic companions on the first trip: Becky, Bill, Jim, Mark, Michael G. and Stephen. Finally, huge thanks to Mark Hoffman for his excellent record-keeping upon which I have drawn relentlessly for this article and to Carl Giometti, Steven Huggins, Aidan Kelly, Bill Moorhead and Nigel Voaden ([flickr.com/photos/nvoaden](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nvoaden)) for use of their excellent photos.

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