

SAN BLAS & THE DURANGO HIGHWAY

March 20-30, 2020

If you love southeastern Arizona, then you'll love this trip. It's Arizona squared! All of the specialty birds that US birders hope to glimpse in the sky islands of southeastern AZ are common in northwest Mexico, and are joined by a host of Mexican species that US birders can only dream of ever finding north of the border. Making it even more compelling is the presence of 35+ Mexican endemics of which we routinely see at least thirty. Many of these, like the Tufted Jay and Mexican Woodnymph, are confined to extremely small geographic areas.

The trip will combine visits to the northern Sierra Madre along the Durango Highway in the Mexican state of Sinaloa and to the tropical lowlands surrounding San Blas in the state of Nayarit. Despite the small size of the geographical area covered during the tour, we will visit a rich diversity of habitats including dry tropical deciduous forests, higher elevation coniferous forests, estuaries and mudflats, palm forest, shade coffee plantations and mangroves. The trip will also include two boat trips on the San Cristobal River outside of San Blas. This complex variety of habitats will provide an opportunity for participants to see around 300 species of birds during the tour including more than 30 of Mexico's endemic species! The trip will begin and end in the coastal resort town of Mazatlan where we will spend the first 2 nights. From Mazatlan we will drive south to the coastal village of San Blas where we will stay at the lovely Garza Canela hotel for 7 nights and in between we will spend a night at the Tufted Jay preserve located at an elevation of 6500 feet.

Friday March 20, Day 1: Our tour begins with arrivals in Mazatlan where we will spend the first evening at a beachfront hotel. If everyone arrives by mid-afternoon we will drive to a nearby estuary where we can familiarize ourselves with some of the area's common species like Sinaloa Crow, Green Kingfisher and Golden-cheeked Woodpecker. Night in Mazatlan.

Saturday March 21 Day 2: The tour begins in earnest this morning with a pre-dawn departure for Rancho de las Palomas, a private reserve located about 40 minutes north of Mazatlan. The ranch is comprised of several hundred hectares of thorn forest and agricultural fields and we will have it entirely to ourselves thanks to the hospitality of the gracious owners. Our primary target here will be the endemic Purplish-backed Jay which often comes to grain spread by the owner and feeds just a few feet from us. The ranch has a comfortable, covered viewing site that sits atop a hill and provides a panoramic view of the surrounding areas. From this vantage point we have often seen White-fronted Parrot, Rufous-bellied Chachalaca, Gray Hawk, Crested Caracara etc. There is also a water feature that attracts a variety of passerine species including Painted, Varied and Lazuli buntings. We will also hike about a mile from the ranch buildings to a dry riverbed where thorn scrub species like Red-breasted Chat, Citreoline and Elegant trogons, Sinaloa Wren, Black-capped Gnatcatcher and other birds can be

found. Around mid-morning we will return to ranch homestead to enjoy an authentic home-cooked Mexican brunch. The quality of the birding combined with the excellent food and warmth of the owners make this an unforgettable experience.

After our meal we will drive back to Mazatlan stopping at a small fish camp where we can find a variety of shorebirds, ducks and herons as well as land birds like Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, Pyrrhuloxia, and Grasshopper and Lincoln's sparrows. We will also stop at a rocky beach where in recent years we have discovered Black Turnstone, Surfbird, Wandering Tattler and occasionally Elegant Tern. After a break at our hotel we will take a late afternoon boat trip to Pierdras Blancas where we'll have great views of Brown and Blue-footed Boobies and Red-billed Tropicbirds. Night in Mazatlan.

Sunday March 22, Day 3: We will depart Mazatlan before sunrise and in order to arrive in the Tufted Jay zone at daybreak. We will have the entire day to explore a 15 kilometer stretch of the old Durango Highway and the trails at the Tufted Jay preserve. We'll start on the old highway, which receives almost no traffic since the completion of the autopista between Durango City and Mazatlan and is now an excellent birding venue. This is a fantastic birding experience as there are many endemics at this range in the Sierra Madre and the quiet nature of the road allows for easy viewing opportunities. Early morning is the best time to see small flocks of Tufted Jays as they come to the roadside to forage, often accompanied by Steller's Jays. Mixed flocks along the road will contain Slate-throated Redstart, White-striped Woodcreeper, Mountain Trogon, Olive Warbler, Crescent-chested Warbler, Hermit Warbler, Townsend's Warbler, Brown-backed Solitaire, the striking Red Warbler, Red-headed Tanager, Scott's Oriole and much more. In lush thickets near water we can search for Golden-browed Warbler, Green-striped Brush-Finch, Russet Nightingale-Thrush and Rufous-capped Brush-Finch. After birding the roadside we'll return to the cabins where Red Warblers, Red-headed Tanagers, Blue-throated Hummingbirds and occasionally less common species like Lesser Roadrunner, Aztec Thrush and Blue Mockingbird. We will also spend some time trying to find the endemic Eared Quetzal which nests in very small numbers on the preserve, but is always difficult to find. It is sure to be an unforgettable experience. Night in the cabins at the Chara Pinta Reserve near El Palmito.

Monday March 23, Day 4: This morning will be another pre-dawn departure so that we can arrive in the small village of Copala by first light. Here we will walk along the villages cobblestone roads through dry, scrubby habitat in search of Rusty-crowned Ground-Sparrow, Sinaloa Wren, Lucy's Warbler, Orange-fronted Parakeet and a plethora of other wintering and resident species. Military Macaws often fly over the village in the early morning as they head to their feeding grounds and we often get great views of them here. After an hour or so in Copala, we will drive a short distance to Panuco Road, a quiet dirt road with little traffic where we often get close views of the macaws feeding in Guanacaste trees. Panuco Road is one of the best places in western Mexico to see these impressive psittacids and we usually get a good show here. In the past we have often seen them feeding just a few feet above us! The macaw will be our main reason for stopping here, but there are many other good birds available including the endemic Golden-crowned Emerald, a striking hummingbird with a long, forked tail. Other

specialties here include Yellow Grosbeak, Black-capped Vireo, Fan-tailed Warbler, Happy & Sinaloa Wren and variety of orioles including Streak-backed and Hooded. By mid-morning we will begin our drive on the new superhighway connecting Mazatlan and Tepic in order to arrive at the coastal town of San Blas by lunchtime. The drive south is rich with raptors and in the past we have seen Gray Hawk (sometimes abundant), Harris's Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk, Short-tailed Hawk and occasionally White-tailed Kite. The highway is also a good place to watch for flocks of the endemic White-naped Swift. In both 2017 and 2018 we found massive flocks feeding just a few meters above our heads! The birding in San Blas will take on a more tropical nature as the area is quite different botanically than the more arid state of Sinaloa. We will plan to arrive early enough to make a late afternoon visit to the San Blas water treatment facility where many Northern Jacana and Purple Gallinule are present. In the past, this area has also provided great views of Collared Forest-Falcon, Crane Hawk and Lineated Woodpecker. Night in San Blas.

Tuesday March 24-Sunday March 29, Days 5-10: There are more birding venues in the San Blas area than we can possibly explore in the time we have, but the following is a summary of some of my favorite sites and ones we are likely to visit during the tour. While in San Blas, we'll return to the hotel for lunch everyday and follow the time-honored Mexican custom of "siesta." During this 2-3 hour break we can swim in the hotel pool, wander through the village or take a nap. San Blas is always a restful place.

Chacalilla: This is a small village located about 20 minutes from our hotel. A number of dirt roads radiate from the center of the village like spokes on a wheel and it is easy to spend an entire morning exploring them. There are birds everywhere around Chacalilla and it is common to record over 100 species there in just a few hours. Typical species include Elegant Quail, Stripe-headed Sparrow, Mexican Parrotlet, White-throated Flycatcher, Scrub Euphonia, Cinnamon Hummingbird, Lesser Ground-Cuckoo, Swanson's Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk and many more.

Tecuitata is a mid-elevation shade coffee and mango plantation owned and operated by a nearby Mexican ejido. Located about 45 minutes south of San Blas, it provides relatively easy access and often excellent birding. The latter is due to several large ficus trees that attract a plethora of early morning feeders. Possibilities here include Citreoline and Elegant trogons, Mexican Parrotlet, Lilac-crowned Parrot, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Colima Pygmy-Owl, Yellow Grosbeak, Great Black-Hawk, Blue Mockingbird, Gray-collared Becard and San Blas Jay. In 2016 we had a very close encounter with 5 Crested Guans feeding in a Guanacaste tree and in 2018 we found a flock of the very rare Lilac-crowned Parrots that were extremely photogenic. What could be better—a leisurely morning with lots of birds.

Cerro de San Juan: We will spend one full day at Cerro de San Juan, a mountainous area about an hour's drive from the hotel where a very different suite of birds will be available to us. All of our birding will be along a quiet mountain road that is relatively flat. Target species include Bumblebee Hummingbird, Mexican Woodnymph, Rufous-

capped Warbler, Spotted Wren, Black-headed Siskin, Flame-colored Tanager, Red-headed Tanager, Slate-colored Redstart, Golden Vireo, Green Jay, Rusty Sparrow, Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Acorn Woodpecker, Gray Silky-Flycatcher and many others too numerous to list. If the group has the desire and energy we will plan to arrive before sunrise to look for night birds like Eared Poorwill, Mexican Whip-poor-will, the cinereous form of the Barred Owl and Whiskered Screech-Owl.

Parque Ecologico de Tepic: This park in the center of Tepic, the capital of Nayarit, is a large wetland complex where Spotted and Aztec Rails can be found. We generally visit this venue in the afternoon after we have finished birding at Cerro de San Juan and have had good success finding the rails even in the heat of the mid-afternoon.

Boat trip to La Tovara: On one afternoon we'll take a boat trip on the San Cristobal River to the springs at La Tovara. During the remaining hours of daylight we'll see many species of herons and egrets including Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Boat-billed Heron, Roseate Spoonbill, Green Kingfisher, Red-billed Pigeon and hundreds and hundreds of egrets and herons settling in to their night roosts. After dark we'll search for Mottled Owl, Pauraque and Northern Potoo. We always get fantastic close-range views of the latter species which is always one of the trip's most memorable moments.

Mexican Hermit Lek: About 30 minutes from San Blas there is a lek where the endemic Mexican Hermit can be seen displaying. The hike up to the lek provides excellent birding as well and in past years we have seen Russet-crowned Motmot, Blue Bunting, Rosy Thrush-Tanager, Black Hawk-Eagle, Ruddy Quail-Dove, Great Black-Hawk etc. It can be challenging to get satisfactory views of the hermits as they display, but with effort and diligence everyone usually sees them well.

Mantanchen Fields and Lagoons: This excellent site is just 15 minutes from the hotel and involves birding along a quiet road that passes through a mix of grassland and wet areas. This is the best place on the tour to find Laughing Falcon and Harris's Hawk, but there are many other birds here and it is not unusual to compile a late afternoon list of 75 species. Possibilities include White-collared Seedeater, Blue-black Grassquit, Limpkin, Anhinga, Roseate Spoonbill, Marsh Wren, Gray Hawk, Short-tailed Hawk, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and Black-bellied Whistling-Duck.

Peso Island: We usually dedicate one late afternoon to this site a short drive from the hotel. After a 5 minute river crossing we walk along a sandy beach through some acacia scrub to a quiet deserted beach where Snowy and Wilson's plovers, American Oystercatcher, Black-bellied Plover and a variety of terns and gulls can be seen. In the interior of the island Collared Forest-Falcon, Rufous-bellied Chachalaca, Ash-throated Flycatcher and a variety of wintering warblers can be seen.

Vivero Road in Singayta: This quiet road about 15 minutes from the hotel has been the best place in recent years to find the endemic Red-breasted Chat, a striking bird that is always high on the lists of trip participants. Though colorful, it is extremely secretive and shy when not breeding and getting good looks at them is always difficult in March. Over

the years we have had mixed results seeing them, but we will try to run one down here. Other good birds at this site include Rosy Thrush-Tanager, Fan-tailed Warbler, Rose-throated Beard, Happy Wren, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper etc.

Pre-dawn and Evening Owl Forays: We generally try to fit in a pre-dawn visit to a place near the hotel where a pair of Vermiculated Screech-Owls were discovered a few years ago. This site represents the northernmost known location for this species which is generally considered to inhabit regions of Central and South America far south of San Blas. The Mottled Owl is much more common and widespread and an evening visit to Singayta usually results in good views for the group.

We will visit all of the above sites and possibly a few more depending upon current conditions and recent sightings at the time of the tour. As mentioned earlier, there are far more places that we could go than we will actually be able to visit. What is a certainty is that regardless of the venues we end up visiting, there will be a great selection of birds and our final total will approach or surpass 300 species and will include more than 30 endemics.

Monday March 30, Day 12: We'll have an early breakfast at the hotel and then make the 3-hour drive back to Mazatlan where the tour ends at the airport. Please do not make flight reservations before 11:30 AM.

COST

The price for this tour \$2595 and is all-inclusive of meals, rooms, ground transportation and guides starting with dinner on the first night in Mazatlan, through breakfast on the last day in San Blas. The price does not include airfare to Mazatlan, any departure taxes (typically included in your plane ticket), immigration documentation (also included in your ticket price), alcoholic beverages, phone calls, laundry, gratuities or items of a personal nature. A single supplement of \$400 will be charged if you choose to room alone.

WEATHER

The tour will take us through dramatically different habitats and elevations from sea level on the Pacific coast, to nearly 8,000 feet in the pine forests of the Sierra Madre. In general be prepared for sunny skies and high temperatures from the mid 70's in the mountains to the mid 80's at lower elevations. In the evening temperatures sometimes drop into the high 50's, but it warms quickly as the sun rises. In 2011, it was abnormally cool with many mornings in the high 40's, but this was exceptional and not to be expected. It is generally dry, but we may encounter a few scattered showers, especially in the mountains.

DEPOSIT & REGISTRATION

A deposit of \$500 and a completed registration form will be required to secure a place on this tour. Checks should be made payable to Otus asio Tours and mailed to Jan Hansen at 900 Hillsborough Road in Chapel Hill NC 27516.

INSECTS

Biting insects can be annoying when birding in and around mangroves. In the early morning hours and again at dusk a pesky no-see-um, called “gegenes” by the locals, can be irritating. These are easily controlled with repellent, long-sleeved shirts and long pants and generally disappear by 8:00 AM.

PACE

This is leisurely paced tour. Obviously there will be days that we need to depart very early to reach our birding destination at the time of peak activity. However, on most days we will return to the hotel for lunch and an afternoon siesta of several hours in duration. All hikes will be slow and easy and mostly over flat or moderate terrain.

MINIMUM/MAXIMUM

A minimum of four persons will be required to operate the tour and it will be limited to seven people.

FOOD

The hotel restaurant in San Blas is one of the finest in all of Mexico. The chef was trained at Cordon Bleu in New York City and offerings are creative and delicious and draw heavily upon local ingredients including a lot of fish, shrimp and vegetables. For those of you who think Mexican food consists solely of cheesy rice and beans, think again! The food on this tour will most certainly be a surprise and a highlight!

ACCOMMODATIONS

The hotel in Mazatlan is located on the waterfront and is within walking distance of the central square. The cabins at the Chara Pinta reserve are rustic, but comfortable and situated in a lovely area that gives us quick and easy access to the best birding sites on the Durango Highway. The hotel in San Blas is first class and your stay there will be unforgettable. It has a pool, laundry service, gift shop, free internet service and one of the finest restaurants in all of Mexico.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Persons entering Mexico will need a valid U.S. passport with expiration date at least six months after departure from Mexico. Tourist cards are required and are obtained upon entry into Mexico.

SMOKING

Smoking is not allowed in tour vehicles. Anyone wishing a smoking room should specify so on their registration form.

HEALTH

It is generally recommended not to drink tap water in Mexico. The hotel in San Blas provides bottled water for drinking and filtered water for filling canteens, bottles etc. Bottled water that is safe to drink is readily available in Mexico. Although the CDC considers people visiting the state of Nayarit to be at risk for malaria, we have rarely encountered mosquitoes during this tour. Please check the CDC website for their recommendations.

INFORMATION

For more information contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or at otusasiotours@gmail.com.