

SAN BLAS & THE DURANGO HIGHWAY

March 8-17, 2018

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, 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 280 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 three 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 five nights.

Thursday March 8, 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. Later we will have an evening orientation dinner at a street side restaurant in the leafy Plazuela Machado. Night in Mazatlan.

Friday March 9 Day 2: This morning we'll drive into the foothills of the Sierra Madre to Panuco Road, a mid-elevation site situated in excellent thornscrub habitat. This is a quiet dirt road with little traffic and we'll spend the morning leisurely walking and birding the roadside edges. Panuco Road is one of the best places in western Mexico to see Military Macaws and we always expect a good show from these large psittacids. In the past we have often seen them feeding just a few feet above us! This is also our best chance to see the endemic Golden-crowned Emerald, a striking hummingbird with a long, forked tail. Other specialties here include Red-breasted Chat (tough in winter), Yellow Grosbeak, Black-capped Vireo, Fan-tailed Warbler, Happy & Sinaloa Wren and variety of orioles including Streak-backed and Hooded. By late morning we'll begin the 1.5 hour drive back to Mazatlan where we'll have lunch and take a late afternoon boat trip to Piers Blancas where we'll have great views of Brown and Blue-footed Boobies and Red-billed Tropicbirds. Night in Mazatlan.

Saturday March 10, Day 3: Early this morning we'll spend some time in the dry thorn forest on the La Noria Road about 25 minutes north of Mazatlan. This is an excellent place to see the range restricted and endemic Purplish-backed Jay. Noisy groups of this large, colorful corvid can usually be seen early in the morning here. Other birds characteristic of this habitat in Sinaloa include Rufous-bellied Chachalaca, White-naped Swift, Nutting's Flycatcher, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Cassin's Kingbird, Pyrrhuloxia and lots of Varied and Painted Buntings. A morning's birding along this road often produces 60-70 species! We'll return to Mazatlan for lunch and then drive into high Sierra Madre where we will spend the next two nights at the Tufted Jay preserve near El Palmito. We should have time for some late afternoon birding around the cabins, and after dinner, we'll look for night birds including Whiskered Screech-Owl, Stygian Owl, Mottled Owl and Mexican Whip-poor-will. Night at the Chara Pinta Reserve.

Sunday March 11, Day 4: We will have the entire day to explore the preserve and a 15 kilometer stretch of the old Durango Highway. We'll start by driving down to the highway and birding at a variety of roadside pull-offs. 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 the trails are crawling with Red Warblers, Red-headed Tanagers, White-throated Hummingbirds and occasionally less common species like Lesser Roadrunner, Aztec Thrush and Blue Mockingbird. It is sure to be an unforgettable experience. Night in the cabins at the Chara Pinta Reserve near El Palmito.

Monday March 12, Day 5: We will leave the the Chara Pinta Reserve darling this morning and drive back to the coast, eventually making our way about 3.5 hours south of Mazatlan to the quaint fishing village of San Blas. The drive south his 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 2017 we found a massive flock 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 try and 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 Linefeed Woodpecker. Night in San Blas.

Tuesday March 13, Day 6: Our first morning will be spent at Singayta, a palm forest about 20 minutes from our hotel. This area was devastated by a hurricane in 2003 and

still has not fully recovered. Despite the losses, there are still many great birds to be found at Singayta and it is quite easy to spend an entire morning there. Typical species at Singayta include Elegant Quail, Russet-crowned Motmot, Black-vented Oriole, White-throated Flycatcher, Fan-tailed Warbler, Scrub Euphonia, Cinnamon Hummingbird and Stripe-headed Sparrow. 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. In the late afternoon we'll take our first boat trip on the San Cristobal River. During the remaining hours of daylight we'll see many species of herons and egrets including Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and Boat-billed Heron. 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. Night in San Blas.

Wednesday March 14, Day 7: This morning's destination is a shade coffee and mango plantation near the village of Tecuitata, about an hour south of San Blas. Early morning birding here can be spectacular and, more importantly, very easy. The latter is due to several large ficus trees that attract a plethora of early morning feeders. Possibilities here include Citreoline Trogon, 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! What could be better—a leisurely morning with lots of birds. After another siesta at the hotel we'll spend the late afternoon at birding a quiet road outside of town where many grasslands species can be found. Highlights here could be White-collared Seedeater, Blue-black Grassquit and Laughing Falcon. Night in San Blas.

Thursday March 15, Day 8: Today will be entirely devoted to birding the mountains an hour inland from San Blas. This is always an exciting day as it presents the possibility of many different species. 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 and many others too numerous to list. We'll eat a delicious picnic lunch at a ranch where we should find Gray-Silky Flycatcher, Arizona Woodpecker, Cassin's Kingbird and many other species reminiscent of southeastern Arizona. Night in San Blas.

Friday March 16, Day 9: Another day in San Blas begins with an early morning boat trip up the San Cristobal. This slow cruise through the mangrove-lined tunnels provides excellent chances for Rufous-necked Wood-Rail, Mangrove Cuckoo, Snail Kite, Limpkin, Crane Hawk, White-fronted Parrot, Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Roseate Spoonbill and a variety of shorebirds. After lunch we'll make another short drive to the outskirts of San Blas. Here the dry fields and shrimp ponds host Harris's Hawk, White-tailed Kite, Common Black-Hawk, Long-billed Curlew and Mangrove Swallow. It also

good for Collared Forest-Falcon and Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. Back at the hotel we'll compile our final bird list and enjoy one last delicious meal. Night in San Blas.

Saturday March 17, Day 10: We'll have an early breakfast at the hotel and then make the 3.5 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 \$2495 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 and long- sleeved shirts and long pants.

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.