



## **Birds in Aguascalientes**

by

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Like the eye of the hurricane where winds are quite, Aguascalientes (Ags) lies in the middle of Mexico, and from a bird wise perspective shows similar moderate activity; activity in the sense of few species.

It is located on the high plain in the semi-arid zone, and with an extension of 80 x 90 kilometres these conditions in them selves put a natural limit to the diversity.

No official list of species exists for the state, but the locals estimate that about 320 species have been registered until now.

The states of Mexico with the largest diversity of bird species, Chiapas, Oaxaca and Veracruz all have registered some 700 species, but in these states you will also find all the types of habitats represented in Mexico, and they all are much larger.

Therefore, taking the limited variety of habitat types to be found in Ags and its small size into consideration, one could argue that the 320 is a pretty good number.

And one could also emphasize the fact that virtually no bird watching has been done in Ags.

The few local biologists with interest in the avifauna, apparently only do little field work, and don't seem to focus much on the diversity issue.

And in fact: Since I came to live here in October 2008 I have recorded, at least two and probably 7 species which have not been officially recorded in the state before (see article on rarities in Aguascalientes). And I have not been excessive in my birdwatching during this period, and have been limited to visit only a few localities.

The fact that a species like Least Grebe (*Tachybaptus dominicus*), a species I recorded the first time during my first visit in the state in February 2006, and have seen in various places since, is not on the (non-existing) list, demonstrates well the lack of information about the avian diversity in the state.

In general the geography and the avifauna is more related to the northern central part of Mexico and southern interior USA, than to the more tropical and humid southern part of the country. Thus only a few species of what one might say the 'true tropics' are possible to find in this state. Among these will be trogons like Elegant (*Trogon elegans*) and potentially Mountain (*Trogon mexicanus*) and Eared Trogons (*Euptilotus neoxenus*) as well as Russet-crowned Motmot (*Momotus mexicanus*). All limited to the western part of the state.

Character species



During my time here in Ags it has become clear, that 4 species in particular and in combination more than any express the essence of the avifauna of the state: Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*), Curve-billed Thrasher (*Toxostoma curvirostre*), Canyon Towhee (*Pipilo fuscus*) and Cactus Wren (*Campylorhynchus bruneicapillus*).

All inhabitants of the dry Mesquite and Nopale scrub land that is the soul of Aguascalientes. Apart from the highest parts in the west these species are your companions wherever you go around the state.

The flycatcher always an elegant delight to watch as it flashes out from its perch, the Thrasher with its characteristic loud, sharp and clear whistle: Wuit Wuit, the humble and gentle Towhee trying to keep low as good as possible, and the well-tempered Wren with an attitude always letting you know that you have been spotted but not welcomed...

#### Winter birds

Like in all of Mexico the largest quantities of birds and species are found during the winter when the visitors from north have arrived.

In the mountains you will probably first of all find increased numbers of passerines, and especially warblers, while the flat open land shows increased numbers of various bird groups.

Most conspicuous are the Blackbirds and Cowbirds:

Yellowheaded Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) runs in groups of thousands on occasion (some days you won't see any). Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) is the most abundant winter species and you see them in tens of thousands. Bronzed Cowbird (*Molothrus aeneus*) increase in numbers as well but only as a fraction of the Bh Cowbird.

But together these three species in mixed groups at the end of the day come flying in from all around to roost for the night in the city of Ags. It is a spectacular sight: In endless bands they pass low above the houses heading for their favourite tree – often alongside large noisy and light exposed streets. And when they reach their tree, it is like if they were absorbed by some immense 'black hole force'. One moment the air is filled with birds and the next you see nothing – only their noisy 'chit chatter' reveals them.

You can see a picture of this under the Black-headed Cowbird. That evening I estimated that some 30000 birds came to roost in just those trees.

In total I wouldn't be surprised, if ½-1 million birds are present in the city in winter time at the night roosts.

Also present in good numbers in the open farmland during winter is White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*) and Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*).

Since they spread out you won't see many during the day, but at night they congregate.



The maximum number I have had of Lb Curlew was some 1300 coming in to roost at a ploughed field at the edge of the town. Rather close to buildings, so either they are not shy or in desperate need of a good roosting site (Ags is growing worryingly fast).

The Ibis follows the same pattern just that they prefer to night roost in a park in the city called El Cedazo (An excellent locality in winter by the way). Some thousand have I counted at the most. The only bad thing is that the birds don't arrive until just before they close the park, so one normally has to leave while they still fly in. But of course if only the count is important it should be possible to make observations from the outside.

In the same park there is a heron colony which at winter time is used as night roost as well. 500 Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) at the most have I seen in winter, 30 Great Egrets (*Ardea alba*) and Snowy Egrets (*Egretta thula*) in lesser numbers.

In the park, and in many places around the state near water, one also finds a small group of Black-crowned Night-herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) and what's curious about them is that they are very active during the day time, in spite of this species normally being most active during the night. One could argue that it is because of too much disturbance in the park that they have been 'forced' to chance their behaviour. But I have seen this behaviour at places around the state with no disturbance at all as well, so the explanation probably is something else.

Another group of birds significantly more present in winter than summer is ducks. Mostly dabbling ducks.

The city parks with lakes normally hold fair numbers of especially Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*), Cinnamon Teal (*Anas cyanoptera*) and Ruddy Ducks (*Oxyura jamaicensis*), but otherwise the larger reservoirs (*presas*) are where to look.

At the reservoir, *presa* Niágara I have counted some 26000 Northern Shovelers at the same time on various days, so probably it is a rather important winter site for this species.

Perhaps it is also worth to mention the Mexican race (*diazi*) of the Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). It is somewhat common. Very often I flush a pair or two when I walk passing a stream or so, but they also congregate at the reservoirs in small numbers, though in *presa* La Colorada I have seen up till 120 birds together.

Otherwise I have had small numbers of just about all the ducks to be seen here. Only one missing is the Canvasback (*Aythya valisineria*).

But perhaps the most interesting group of birds in winter time is the sparrows.

Many of the northern species reach Ags in winter time in mixed flocks which makes it a challenge to identify them. A good challenge I must say!



You encounter them throughout the dry scrubby land where seed plants grow wild and free. This includes tiny patches toggged between houses around the city as well, though the larger numbers are found in the countryside.

Chipping (*Spizella passerina*), Clay-colored (*Spizella pallida*), Vesper (*Pooecetes gramineus*), Savannah (*Ammodramus sandwichensis*), Lincoln (*Melospiza lincolni*) and Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*) are among the most common winter visitors.

A species like Brewer's Sparrow (*Spizella breweri*) supposedly should be seen here as well in winter, but I have not been able to find any yet; or have overlooked them since they look much like Chipping and Clay-colored Sparrow in winter plumage (somehow I don't believe the latter).

Besides these visitors Ags houses several resident species. Some are more or less common though they never tend to make a notice of them selves the same way the visitors do. Rufous-crowned (*Aimophila ruficeps*), Black-chinned (*Spizella atrogularis*), Black-throated Sparrows (*Amphispiza biliniata*) all can be found rather easily as well as the ever-present Canyon Towhee and in the mountains Yellow-eyed Junco (*Junco phaeonotus*).

Chipping, Savannah and Lark Sparrows are also resident species, but in winter probably difficult to separate from the visitors.

The North American warblers is one of the most attractive bird groups to watch in Mexico. Almost all the species coming from the north can be seen in Mexico during winter or migration. Unfortunately Ags does not have many suited habitats, and hosts only a fraction of these.

In the lowland the most common species, seen throughout, is the Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*) and exclusively of the 'Audubon'-type (yellow-throated) though Howell (-95) claims the 'Myrtle'-type to be present throughout most of Mexico in winter. Less common species are Orange-crowned (*Vermivora celata*), Wilson's (*Wilsonia pusilla*) and Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica petechia*) to be found in parks as well as countryside. Species like Nashville (*Vermivora ruficapilla*) and Virginia's Warbler (*Vermivora virginiae*) are even less common visitors.

In the mountains my experience is still rather limited but in winter and during migration species like Townsend's, (*Dendroica townsendi*) Hermit (*Dendroica occidentalis*), Grace's (*Dendroica graciae*), Black-throated Grey (*Dendroica nigrescens*) and Black & White Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*), American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*), Northern Waterthrush (*Seiurus noveboracensis*) and MacGillivray's Warbler (*Oporornis tolmiei*) could be found.

Species like Rufous-capped Warbler (*Basileuterus rufifrons*), Painted Redstart (*Myioborus pictus*), Slate-colored Redstart (*Myioborus miniatus*) should all be residents in the mountains.

Of these I have only seen Rufous-capped Warbler.

Raptor species present in winter will primarily be White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*), Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) and Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*), Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperi*), Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), American Kestrel (*Falco*



sparverius) and Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*). On occasion an Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) passes by as well. These can be found throughout the lowland while resident species like Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) and Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) can be found in the remote mountain areas and Harris's Hawk near the large presas to the west. An actual raptor migration, like it's seen in Veracruz, does not happen.

When it comes to hummingbirds, Aqs is neither blessed with many nor the most spectacular species. Some 13 species have been or should be possible to find depending on time of year. A bit disappointing I have to admit that I have only been able to register 5 of these until now. The most common species is without doubt the Broad-billed Hummingbird (*Cynanthus latirostris*) which can be seen all year and throughout the state. It covers about 85 % of my hummingbird observations. The next most common is the Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*) even though it is only a winter visitor. And the last three being Violet-crowned (*Amazilia violiceps*), Magnificent (*Eugenes fulgens*) and Black-chinned Hummingbirds (*Archilochus alexandri*). Observations of these species can all be counted on one hand.

Most likely this has to do with the few different localities I have visited. Frequent visits to the mountains should at least add Blue-throated (*Lampornis clemenciae*) and White-eared (*Hylocharis leucotis*) Hummingbirds among the residents, and perhaps provide better changes to find more of the wintering or passing species like Ruby-throated (*Archilochus colubris*), Calliope (*Stellula calliope*) or Allen's (*Selasphorus sasin*) Hummingbirds.

#### Summer birds

In general everything calms down. The visitors have left and the local birds are breeding, attracting little attention.

But a species like Botteri's Sparrow (*Aimophila botteri*) only shows up in June to start breeding. It is supposed to be resident, but Howell states that locally it might be migratory. I think this is correct regarding the birds here in Aqs, since I have covered the area where they breed all through winter and have not seen any sign of them whatsoever during this period - or at any other locality in the state for that matter.

And Yellow-breasted Chat, another summer guest, is a local breeder in well-vegetated stream-beds (at least in the northern part of the state).

At the end of July and in August the shorebirds start to arrive from the north. Among the first species are Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*), Greater Yellowleg (*Tringa melanoleuca*), Lesser Yellowleg (*Tringa flavipes*), Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*), Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*) and Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) to mention the most numerous. A few presas at the eastern part of the state are excellent for shorebirds and I have registered 20 species of shorebirds in Aqs, which is pretty good for a dry small desert state far away from the coasts and major waterways (23 species have been seen in total).



Another great experience I've had is, from my house in the city of Ags, to hear the Upland Sandpipers (*Bartramia longicauda*) passing above. In few numbers I presume, they move on south both night and day.

Largest group spotted during the day was 6 on August 30.

#### IBA

One IBA (Important Bird Area) has been recognized in Aguascalientes: The Sierra Fría mountain area.

This comparatively unspoiled area houses Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), Prairie Falcon, several owl species including a healthy population of Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis*), Wild Turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*) and a host of other mountain species.

#### Endemics

Ags does not house any endemics restricted only to this area. In fact, Ags hardly houses any endemics at all. A potential Russet Nightingale-thrush (*Catharus occidentalis*) or a more likely Striped Sparrow (*Oriturus superciliosus*). None of which I have seen in Ags at the moment of writing.

**Correction, 2009-10-06:** Working on the endemic list I suddenly realized that I have actually seen two true mexican endemics in Ags: Rufous-backed Robin (*Turdus rufopalliatus*) and Black-backed Oriole (*Icterus abeillei*). What do you know...

**Correction, 2010-05-22:** I just realized that studying Howell I have not paid enough attention to the text: The Black-backed Orioles I have claimed to be seeing here in Ags, are actually Bullock's Oriole (*Icterus bullockii*).

On May the 20<sup>th</sup> 2010 I went to Cañada Pabellon Hidalgo where I most surprisingly found two Blue Mockingbirds (*Melanotis caerulescens*) which is another endemic species in Mexico. And it was actually a lifer as well. Being a skulker it could be that it is easier to find at this time of year when they are singing.