



NORTHWEST TRIP, AGUASCALIENTES, ENSENADA, SALTILLO Oct 27 – Nov 23 2010

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First stop now seems ages ago, and the slight disappointment of not finding the Sierra Madre Sparrow almost forgotten. Non-birding circumstances being the cause to decide to make this journey at this time of the year of course should have double negative effect on the species to be seen. Some resident species keeping low profile outside the breeding season, and northern specialties that normally reach the northern part of Mexico during winter apparently had not yet arrived in big enough numbers for me to stumble upon them.

No New Year grumbles from here though, because: A month, 8200 km, 315 tour species, 70 Mexican species and 23 lifers later I returned to Aguascalientes with that exceptional sensation inside you only feel when you live your life in correspondence with your true self. "Traveling is living" H.C. Andersen said, and I agree all the way!

Ensenada being my end goal, the route more or less gave itself, that said from a birding-while-traveling perspective. Looking at a map you would be surprised to know that when people from Aguascalientes wants to go north along the western coast they do not choose the northwest route via Zacatecas and Durango Highway which is the most direct route. Instead they go south via Guadalajara taking the northbound coastal highway. And this of course because it is faster, despite of a longer traveling distance, mainly because of the slooow Durango Highway crossing the Sierra Madres, but at present time a toll road from Durango to Villa Unión is under construction (large part finished) and it is probably only a question of time before this route will be a better alternative going north from Ags. But if birding is your objective the Durango Highway route always will be THE option. Sierra Madre Sparrow, Tufted Jay and Sinaloa Martin just to mention the most obvious species present – the Martin only during the breeding season of course.

With the mailing list information from Jon Landis from last April in mind, after 6 hours drive from Ags, I reached El Salto, checked at a hotel and headed toward el ejido where the sparrows are found. Señor Castro was in the middle of his dinner when I found his house, and his two sons being away he kindly offered to show me to the place himself after finishing eating.

If not driving with an attitude, I WAS driving an Attitude, a Dodge compact style model, and though it did manage to take us all the way to the fields where the birds are, it would have been more than willing to have stayed behind giving room for a high clearance counterpart.

The military was at its post, a shooting field, and only reluctantly let us pass despite the fact that Castro was local. It is best to go on weekends he told me, since they will be present but not shooting, and it is more likely that they won't deny you access.

But as you already know it was kinda energy wasted to go there since we didn't find the sparrows. It was in the afternoon and though ploughing through all suited habitat we got no positive encounter. Once I thought I heard one singing but couldn't make enough of it. **Savannah's** and **Striped Sparrows** were present in good numbers. The latter with about 80. I've only seen it once before, in Veracruz, and when I saw the first ones flying, they reminded me of odd looking Cactus Wrens. A paralyzed **Grasshopper Sparrow** trapped between me and Castro on a barbed-wire allowed for a new photo species. In general a very good sparrow locality and toward the end two **Arizona Woodpeckers** and a **Hooded Grosbeak** showed up adding two lifers to my list.

Since the SM sparrow was a high priority for me, I originally had planned to go there both in the afternoon and again the next morning, but the circumstances made me decide not to: I was going to pay Castro for his assistance, but I was not willing to pay him again the next day. But with the attitude of the soldiers I imagined that I only would be allowed access with him accompanying me. This, and the fact that the birds doubtlessly are easier to find during the breeding season made me decide that it will be better to visit again another time, in spring and on a weekend.

I paid Castro 300 pesos (about 12 pesos on a usd) which he looked very happy and surprised to receive.

Barranca Rancho Libre

Next stop was Barranca Rancho Libre where the main target was **Tufted Jay**.

The preserve which lies close to the small community El Palmito on the Sinaloa side of the state border, some 100 km



and 2 hours drive west of El Salto, is definitely worth a longer visit than the 1-day visit I gave it. Best would it be stay at the cabins there (www.senderomexico.com).

Had it only been for the Jay I could have continued 15 minutes after arrival as a happy man since a small group already showed up by the highway at the ascend while I was eating my two days old Dominos Pizza. In fact I stayed down by the road for more than an hour since the birding for that period of time was excellent there including **Red-headed Tanager, White-striped Woodcreeper** and **Rufous-capped Brush-Finch**.

I'm the type who more often than seldom likes to go his own ways. To stray about to dig up my own birds or new interesting places is ideal. But with time I've also learned that if you want a high hit rate on difficult or rare species you have to respect and listen to what is generally known by the community. And with the on-the-move spot birding that was the nature of this trip, I stayed close to my copy of Howell's "Where to" book. Though it has been along for more than a decade it is still a useful resource to cling to. But since I never bring my books when I have to walk, I left it in the car.

Therefore it was not intentional when I kept on walking along the main ascending road after where you have to keep left along the stream to reach BRL. I thought I could remember where to go and with a good picture of the locality sketch in my head I was pretty sure I had it under control. I knew the road should bend left and after some time you would reach the stream to cross. But this never showed up. Instead the road kept winding rightward and upward way to the east of BRL. Having missed the detail about leaving the main road, though in doubt, I started to fit the picture of the sketch I had in my head into the surroundings, and I kept walking for about 4 km up up up hoping and expecting...

After having passed the big bottles of Sprite and Coca Cola placed on the track up there in the middle of nowhere, I finally gave up, though the road continued, and started walking back with a pitiful feeling of having dipped big, for not only the second day in a row, but the second day of the trip. The first day dipping a species, the next a whole locality! Glad I was not a tour guide!

Had the birding been bad I probably would have stopped earlier, but now I got good views of **Arizona Woodpecker, White-striped Woodcreeper, Tufted Flycatcher, Buff-breasted Flycatcher** and **Hepatic Tanager** among others.

None of these observations though would remain locality species since, on the way back I met a local and his son cutting down young trees, exactly where I should have left the road. They assured me that the Barranca was indeed up there, and I decided to do the walk. It was starting to be late and I was a bit tired, but I could not accept the defeat so close to the goal.

Along the ascend to the Barranca I saw all the same species as I saw on the main road, plus **Pine Flycatcher, Mountain Trogon** and a group of 20 semi-photogenic **Tufted Jays**. Also my only [**Gray-cheeked**] **Red Warbler** of the trip.

So to repeat myself: Listen to what is known and do not rely on your memory – RAYOS!

Because of the late hour I decided not to descend into the canyon to try to find the Green-striped Brush-Finch.

Room for improvement and a return visit.

That same statement could also be used in relation to night birds like owls and nightjars. November is not the best month for these in general, but my planning throughout the trip did not include serious attempts to get these species and the result became thereafter.

On my way down to the coast and Villa Unión I stopped a good half hour at Panuca Road just to say that I had been there. Parrots should be seen from here and definitely it would be worth staying at what should be a close by camp called Daniel's (mentioned on mailing lists). Tour species from here were **Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet** and **Blue Mockingbird**.

La Noria road

After a cheap but clean stay at the Suite Refugio in Villa Unión La Noria road was first and only stop the next day. I haven't been to a lowland shrub locality for some time, and I enjoyed it plenty. After getting used to it, the lush green vegetation in the moist heat simply is a favorite.

And Howell is right: It is an excellent locality. 61 species in 3 and a half hour should speak for itself.

Red-bellied Chachalaca, Purplish-backed Jay, Black-throated Magpie-Jay, Yellow-winged Cacique, Golden-cheeked Woodpecker and **Painted Bunting** to mention a few. And 800 **Sinaloa Crows** in a continuous early morning stream heading east to do what Sinaloa Crows do when they head east. And both **Caracaras** and Magpie-Jays taking advantage of the nightly result of the many traffic kills. New species were **Thick-billed Kingbird** which were quite common with 16 individuals counted, **Lucy's' Warbler** 2 and **Yellow Grosbeak**, a singleton.



El Fuerte

Heading north along the highway I had been somewhat in doubt whether or not I should give way to my dream about visiting the Copper Canyon now that I would be passing by it so closely. Or more precisely: to do the famous railroad trip from Los Mochis to Creel.

The bank account resisted for a while, but with the argument from the good adventure saying that since the whole trip would be done based on a flashing red bottom line, in the big swung of time and space it wouldn't make that much of a difference when it would be time were to pay back. I agreed heartily and in the afternoon while approaching Los Mochis I took the turn-off towards El Fuerte where I would spend the night before boarding the train the next morning.

Thanks to Lonely Planet I decided to go to El Fuerte instead of Los Mochis for a double good reason: The train leaves Los Mochis at 6 o'clock in the morning, and though I earlier in my life, for 4 years, had a job requiring a wake up at 4 o'clock am, it will never become a sound habit with me get up that early, and since the first three hours going to El Fuerte would pass through boring farmland, from a tour attraction point of view, there was no reason to do this stretch. Adding that the train fare would also be cheaper, it was all happy ho. And even more so when driving through a beautiful savanna landscape where I side-glimpsed a **White-tailed Hawk** flying next to the road. Indeed a good specie here in the north.

As stated by Lonely Planet El Fuerte is not a cheap place to stay. No backpacker hangout. Mentally I had prepared myself to accept a higher hotel price without dropping my jaw, but since I arrived at an early hour in the afternoon, I had good time to look for the best option. It is a small town with a beautiful well-preserved colonial center and a nice atmosphere. At the town hall they told me which would be the cheapest hotel. Up the steep street passing the museum and fortress and behind it further up 50 meters by a horrible access road, ending at a dead end in front of the hotel. Río Vista. From the entrance you could see nothing special. Rather dark it was and not particular welcoming. Nobody was around except for a caged sad-looking parrot. But on the table next to the bird was lying a copy of Howells Birds in Mexico assuring me that this had to be the right place for me to stay.

Then the owner came: Plenty of room and 500 pesos a night. I agreed and could not believe my eyes when we entered the balcony and had the most exceptional view overlooking the river below us. I definitely had found the right place.

Thrilled by this unexpected discovery I went birding right away along the river until sundown. Among other good species some 40 **Mexican Parrotlets** became my next lifer as well as a **Bell's Vireo**. Especially interesting were the local **House Finches** of the subspecies *rhodopus*. If you didn't know better you would take them for Purple Finches without hesitation, which was also the case with the other owner, they were two brothers, who worked as a bird guide as well.

Knowing the Mexicans it didn't surprise me in itself that he had misidentified the finches, but since he told me that North American birders frequently came to El Fuerte hiring him as local guide, I would have expected them to have corrected him. Of course if they knew...but since there are no observations of Purple Finch from El Fuerte (or anywhere outside Baja California) on ebird I expect them to do so. So I remain puzzled!

No puzzling though about the good quality and service at the hotel.

The non-birding brother called me a taxi the next morning and prepared me a good burritos lunch to bring along and assured me that it would not be a problem leaving the car at the hotel until I came back. Simply perfect. And what I should learn later, the price was not expensive, not compared to what I had to pay further north for the same quality.

Barranca del Cobre – Copper Canyon.

Ever since I was in Mexico the first time in 1988 the Copper Canyon has been a goal for me. Not that I know much about it, but the comparison to Grand Canyon and it being bigger and deeper has always fascinated me. And even more so with the train ride being mentioned as one of the greatest train rides in the world.

It was therefore with great expectations that I got on the train at about 920 in Huanos some 5 km from El Fuerte. (Maybe the geographical conditions made it necessary to place the rail road away from the town or, what I would like to believe, someone did some good thinking and deliberately decided to place it away from the town to avoid the continuous noise every time a train would come or leave. They hoot you know! Loud and constantly throughout the country where ever they go, including Aguascalientes).



The railway line connects Los Mochis in Sinaloa and Chihuahua city in Chihuahua. From near sea level at Los Mochis it rises to about 2500 meters (7900 feet) between Divisadero and Creel before dropping to some 1600 meters (5500 feet) reaching Chihuahua.

Obviously it is not a high speed connection: From Los Mochis to Creel where I got off, it takes 9-10 hours, and some 4-5 hours extra if you want to go all the way to Chihuahua. So, though the scenery is extraordinary, the risk of getting bored does exist; another good reason to use El Fuerte as your starting point.

The train runs daily and comes in two flavors: First and second class. I took the first class.

The second class train runs about an hour later than the first class and stops more frequently (I think) making it a longer ride. The equipment appeared to be the same as the first class, but since the price for a ticket is about the half of a first class ticket it is always more crowded, by local people.

You can buy tickets at travel agencies or on the train. Apparently the latter never is a problem. The only surprise was the price. I had seen the price for the ride from Los Mochis and of course I expected that it would be cheaper now that I cut off 3 hours of the trip, but no. The price was the same, about 1000 pesos one way. Of course I paid, but I couldn't avoid a suspicious thought about being cheated. It was not until I talked to the staff at the train station in Creel that I understood. Recently they had changed the system so that the pricing now was based on zones. And of course they, very convenient for them, had put Los Mochis and El Fuerte in the same zone. Perhaps too many people, like me, had started to skip the first stretch only going to/from El Fuerte to save time and money. Evolutionary race in practice.

The train holds a very good standard being comfortable and all and the staff is excellent. They keep track of all passengers to make sure they get off at the right stop. A good idea I think, since the train only stops a minute or so at every station, so you really have to be prepared to jump off. And first class being more of a tourist ride than a real train service of course you can buy souvenirs on board: T-shirts, caps, maps and da da da...

And so, what was it like?

Well, from a birding point of view, which of course was not why I was there, there isn't much to talk about. The most you see in the lowland just after El Fuerte, some doves, caracaras and magpie-jay. And then a suspected Goshawk that would have been my first in Mexico. It looked big, but later on this trip I had another one I suspected, but the photo proved it to be a Coopers. So the first one probably only was a Coopers as well.

And about the scenery let me cut a long explanation short and say: It was beautiful and at times quite spectacular but never became really fantastic. The best part is on either side of the small town Témoris closer to El Fuerte than to Creel. Here you ride along a river canyon, in places deep and wide, in others narrow and shallow.

I'm not sure what exactly I had expected, but probably something more dramatic like riding on the edge of a 1000 meter deep drop with great views overlooking a vast open canyon complex as I know it from pictures of Grand Canyon.

But perhaps I've already seen so many great landscapes in Mexico that the drama doesn't affect me any more?

Or perhaps when talking about the canyon you have to realize that the train doesn't enter the real canyon system, only at Divisadero where the train stops for 15 minutes, allowing you to get off and shop and take pictures, you get a glimpse and an idea of what it is really about. That is why, if you want to do it right, you have to plan to get off at one of the stations around Divisadero or Creel for a day or more to hook up on a guided tour to penetrate the area.

Or you can do it yourself in your own car if you come from the Chihuahuan side. There is no direct road access from El Fuerte to Creel, which is the biggest town up there. Only if you go further north along the coast entering Sonora you will find an access road, but it is a much longer trip than taking the train, and not a very logical route to incorporate in your itinerary sightseeing forth and about in this part of the country.

After Divisadero the landscape changes to even less dramatic, but still beautiful, passing through pines and meadows to finally arrive in Creel some two hours later.

With no other option than returning to El Fuerte by train, I decided to stay in Creel for two nights allowing for a days birding, and not to have to do the train ride two consecutive days.

I wanted to visit Cascada Cusárere (Cusárere waterfall), a locality located about half an hours drive from Creel, and according to Howell, the easiest spot in Mexico to get to see Eared Quetzal.

This cardinal species would be a lifer for me and of course I wanted to go.

Without a car I took a taxi the next morning (250 pesos one way) arriving at 730 am and 0 degrees Celsius (32 F).

It is a beautiful place with easy walking along the stream toward the waterfall one and a half kilometer from the road.

As one could expect the number of species were modest – too modest unfortunately. No sign of the Quetzal at all. The



closest I got were the **Steller's Jays** sometimes calling in a similar way. Of the 14 species I saw, only two other site specialties, **American Dipper** and **Townsend's Solitaire**, were among them. Again, probably the wrong time of year to try for a local mountain species.

The train ride back naturally felt longer without the excitement of meeting the unknown, but also because it got dark before reaching El Fuerte. So if you plan doing the ride for the ride itself, it is important that you at least include a start out from the Sinaloa side to get to see all the scenery, especially during winter when it gets dark around 530-600 o'clock pm.

Topolobampo

The next day it was my plan only to go to Navojoa (150 km north of Los Mochis) to search for Rufous-winged and Five-striped Sparrows at the Antenna hill mentioned by Howell. So I had plenty of time birding on the way.

But before leaving El Fuerte I wanted to visit the hummingbird feeders at the nearby hotel Posada del Hidalgo where the birding brother had told me I could see several hummingbird species other than the two most common, **Violet-crowned** and **Broad-billed Hummingbirds**, that you also could see at Río Vista.

So I went there to have breakfast to legitimize my presence. The feeders were indeed well-visited with lots of Violet-crowned and Broad-billed and a single **Costa's Hummingbird** and few **Plain-capped Starthroats**. Costa being a new Mexican species and Plain-capped a lifer.

The birding brother also told me that the feeders at Río Vista were not used in the same degree by the hummingbirds because they were not regularly maintained. Since birding was so much in focus by them the obvious question of course is: Why were they not maintained? but I sensed it was wiser not to dig into it.

I took off in the late morning with a very content feeling about making this side trip, and I'm sure I'll be back some day.

Howell doesn't mention localities from this area, but very kindly the birding brother felt like giving me a gift after our long conversation about the birds and the bees in the evening. A small locality guide made by an American years back. He mentioned some wetlands around Topolobampos, the embarkation town for the ferry to Baja California, that were worth visiting, so I did. And it was.

Boobies, gulls and terns around the harbor, and a good variety of shorebirds at the flats towards the beach north of town. The only **Roseate Spoonbill** of the trip I saw her. Beautiful intact mangrove along this stretch left a very good impression of the area. Reaching the beach in the late afternoon (time really was flying constantly on this trip) I got my first **Elegant** and **Least Tern** (only) for the trip and **Yellow-footed** and **Western Gull** became new on my Mexico list. Definitely worth a longer visit.

Navojoa

Next day. Some 15 km along the road toward Álamos, east of Navojoa, you find a small hill with easy access. Here both **Rufous-winged** and **Five-striped Sparrows** breed. I knew that others had been visiting outside the breeding season and only been able to find the Five-striped, so I decided to stop along the road where the thorn scrub looked suitable to give the Rufous-winged an extra chance. And after a little playback it really was there. Only shortly but enough time to id it properly. And had it not been for the notorious barbed-wire fencing off the property where it went, I would have chased it to try for a photo. Fences in Mexico are not always a sign of prohibited access. Normally it is no problem to enter community land (ejidal), private land not so, but since you never really know which is which, it is better not to try.

Climbing the circular road up the hill, in the car, on the southwest side before reaching the top, almost no birds at all, two Five-striped finally showed up. I playbaked them to try to make them come closer for a little portrait, but they kept staying 10 meters up the slope, and I had to accept photos of documentation quality only.

It is my intention to create a photo collection of ALL the species seen in Mexico, TAKEN in Mexico, that's why I mention this. Probably a lifelong project, but since I, even more so after this trip, feel rather confident that Mexico is where I will live my life, I have the time ahead of me. An enjoyable challenge.

Being that close to Álamos under other circumstances I think I would have gone there too, since it is a well-known locality. Mainly because of a large American expat community. Christmas Bird Counts have been done there for years with more or less regularity. But since I had already gotten my two sparrows other easy-to-get specialties didn't come to mind, so I decided to stop birding early and move north.



Caborca

Next birding locality would be Puerto Peñasco. But I was pretty sure I could not reach it in one stretch without having to drive after sunset. Night driving can not be recommended in Mexico in general, and even less so if you're not familiar with the roads. Reasons for this mainly being loose live stock or wild animals crossing or standing on the road, bad road signing and bicycles driving without light. So I had to find a bed somewhere in between.

Recalling the trip from Ags to El Salto on the first day where I drove 500 km and felt tired afterward, I was sure I would not be able to drive that far again.

The distances between the cities up here in the north are large, so you can't just pop in at a hotel whenever you feel like it. Therefore I thought it would be realistic to stop in Hermosillo though it was pretty far from Puerto Peñasco.

But what I didn't know was that the landscape along the toll road in Sonora is flat farmland and the road straight, so the kilometers were passing by with a surprisingly high speed, and I reached Hermosillo in the middle of the afternoon, where I rewarded myself with another mediocre pizza from Dominos.

Another reason why I advanced so rapidly was the lack of distractions along the road in the form of interesting scenery or short stop birding opportunities. The landscape is simply dead boring. In fact it already starts some 40-50 kilometers north of Mazatlán in Sinaloa, where abundant untamed vegetation is replaced by agricultural fields. The food chamber of Mexico no doubt, but a graveyard birding wise.

Of course I decided to continue, and reached Santa Ana when it was getting dark.

As is often the case, even in smaller towns, there were hotels to choose from, but I still didn't feel tired and encouraged myself to do the last 100 kilometers toward Caborca which I thought would be an ideal place to stop even though I would have to drive through the darkness, so that I the next day could approach PP from the morning. 610 km that day felt like a good days work, and the hotel was cheap and fine.

From Caborca I decided to take the old highway running closer to the coast rather than the toll road north to Sonoyta in hope of a more interesting landscape and better birding opportunities.

The landscape definitely changed for the better from an aesthetic point of view, cactus desert, and soon the first organ cacti showed up. But the danger of this is of course that it is easier to be distracted with the risk of accidents as the result. And the road being very narrow it was no surprise that I actually had to experience two major accidents along this road.

The desert away from water doesn't give much in terms of be-feathered creatures, but still it gave me two new Mexican species: **Sage Sparrow** and **Gambel's Quail**, out of 15 species seen before reaching Puerto Peñasco.

Puerto Peñasco

Puerto Peñasco is a strange place growing out of the desert sand at the northeast corner of the Sea of Cortéz. On the paper it is a Mexican town, but in reality it has been invaded – inhabited by Americans long time ago. Being close to the US border it's an easy way for inland Americans to reach the ocean fast. Many have bought houses and depending on where you go, you are more likely to meet an American in the street than a Mexican. Everybody will address you in English (me being white), and will continue to do so, even if you insist on answering in Spanish which I did for a while. Wild untouched nature is long gone around here with housing projects continuing along the coast both north and south of the old town. You might say that the old town still has some charm with the malecón and the fishing harbor, if you can ignore all the bars and discos...The newly opened Italian restaurant Mare Blu near the Malecón was a true highlight though a bit pricy.

Next to the old town the community at La Cholla looks most attractive in the sense of living in PP. In between the two, in bare desert sand, an army of high rise apartment buildings are shooting up, many of these still under construction and many others uninhabited giving the impression of a fancy ghost town. Surreal in its own way, and even more so with the golf course in front of it.

But all this said in a negative way, regarding the birds, it is really an interesting place to visit. Wintering gulls and shorebirds and local species like **Le Conte's Thrasher**, Gambel's Quail and Sage Sparrow.

Having been living in Aguascalientes for two years I still had many of the gulls and seabirds to come, something I looked forward to, and therefore I chose PP as a stopover.

The seabirds were poor with only the common **Boobies**, **Brown and Blue-footed**, though they allowed for close photos



at the point of La Cholla, and the gulls acceptable only getting common species as well. Large number of **California Gulls** and a moderate number of **Ring-billed Gulls** being the most noteworthy. A few **Bonaparte's Gulls** were welcomed, a species I haven't seen that often.

Apparently the gulls choose there wintering area differently because when I later visited Ensenada the dominating gull was **Western** with hardly any of the others present except for **Heerman's**. Here in PP I only saw two Western. Heerman was present in good numbers here as well. **Herring** only in few numbers on both coasts.

In relation to the localities from PP mentioned by Howell all of them seemed to 'work' as he described. Just to say that some of the sewer ponds today don't have access. If you enter the area from the Caborca highway as Howell describes, crossing the railroad, then you should be aware that only the ponds to the west of the buildings (the old sewer ponds) have free access. The others that lie right next to the railroad tracks do not. I tried these in the afternoon, entering from the highway, and was thrown out by the guard.

The next day I asked at the gate, and they told me what I just described.

Instead of parking and entering from the highway, looking suspiciously, it is better to cross the railroad tracks on the Sonoyta highway just north of the Caborca – Sonoyta junction and take the first dirt road driving on the north side of the tracks to reach the ponds.

I had both Le Conte's Thrasher and Gambel's Quail there, but was a bit disappointed when I didn't find any interesting migrants in the ponds or the trees surrounding them. Many **Marsh Wrens** though.

I guess it is the same psychological story as usual. You read about all the rare species that have been seen in an area, it sounds exciting and you start focusing on them giving them comparatively more attention than they deserve in relation to the chances of actually getting to see them. And then you create this picture in your head where they fill too much and you end being disappointed when they don't show up. But rare actually means rare, and though you might have a feeling that you're the greatest birdwatcher in the world entitled to make all the extraordinary observations, it doesn't change that fact!

I'm sure I will come back one day, attracted by the birds of course but also the atmosphere of the place in its own bizarre way. And looking at the geography I have this idea that seabird migration/movement under the right circumstances could be good. Especially during/after a storm, giving the conditions, I expect that seabirds could get trapped in the gulf and end up at the bottom of it, having to pass by PP. Like seabirds entering the Red Sea ending up at the north beach in Eilat, Israel. Hope I'll get a chance to prove it one day.

Baja California

Leaving PP with thumbs up I headed for Baja California passing the most beautiful cactus and desert landscapes around the Pinacate National Park. Driving was in focus, so I hardly birded this stretch. Also because I was now close to the border not knowing the degree of suspiciousness shown by the authorities.

In that sense, I was more than surprised though, now and later driving toward east, that I hardly saw a uniform. Of course there were police and military checkpoints, as is the case throughout all of Mexico, but not more than usual, and I was always waved on without problems nor further questions. Traveling like this, sleeping in a new place nearly every day, I found out it can be difficult to remember right on the spot, if you're asked, the name of the place where you're going, and once or twice I actually went blank when they asked me that question, and had to look for the answer, which could have been taken as a suspicious behavior, I guess. But no. I must have been radiating pure innocence...

Where the armed forces were completely harmless and civil, it was a different story with the food inspection!

I normally bought my supplies for several days, so I didn't have to shop every day. But that proved to be a bad idea regarding fruit and traveling to and from Sonora.

To avoid diseases imported via fruit, the control at the state border is rather strict. In principle nobody is allowed to bring any kind of fresh fruit across the state border. But how do you know that in advance? At least I didn't. So I had to hand over all the fruit I had bought earlier, except for one apple that I promised to eat very soon... This lack of consequence I experienced again when I went the other way as well. Believe it or not, I really forgot about the restriction and had bought some more apples and bananas in Baja California somewhere, and only became aware of it when I saw the signs at the fruit control entering Sonora.

The chance that they would have believed me, if I had said I didn't bring any fruit was probably big, but I like to play it



safe when it comes to the authorities, so I told them that I had a few apples...Hhhmmm manzanas....hhhmmm...pásale por favor. A sound response of course but again, absolutely inconsequent. Maybe the implementation of stupid rules like this is not just a Mexican behavior but something universal that is happening all around the world where the authorities/politicians are not able to think straight in their fear for how the people might act. But it makes me think about the swine flu disease a few years back when the Mexican authorities overreacted with severe economic consequences as a result. And how many died or got infected? And how many have died during the drug war? Consecuencia y sentido común mi querido Calderón!

And in this case it seems even more stupid. The bananas from Chiapas that Walmart sells in Aguascalientes I'm just about 100 % sure are the same they are selling in Walmart in Hermosillo. Probably arriving with a different truck but still from the same origin. Had Sonora been an island I could understand their thinking, but in this case I give up. Maybe that's the best thing to in general: Don't think so much, and focus on your own business and let the others do theirs.

And my next business was to continue my journey.

If you have a picture of the Colorado river as being majestic and mythical, then I advice you not to plan your first visit to where the highway toward Mexicali crosses it. I had hoped for a broad and powerful water body flowing slowly toward the Gulf in a natural environment, a spectacular natural scenery. But it was the saddest of all experiences on this trip: A concrete mounted straight canal was all it was. Amputated and sedated, like a raptor in a cage with no dignity. I hurried on...

All the land between the Colorado river and Mexicali is now farmland. I tried a side road to see if I could find a good spot for Abert's Towhee. But somehow I felt distracted by people everywhere I found suitable habitat. Quite unusual, and I'm wondering if it had something to do with the fact that this was border land, and that I had a picture in my head saying that these people perhaps would be very suspicious about a stranger stopping in unusual places with an unusual behavior (birdwatching is not a commonly known activity in Mexico). So I gave it up and moved on.

It was still easy riding and though I had planned to stop in Mexicali, I arrived too soon to stop, so I decided to continue to all the way to Tijuana. That way I could enjoy the scenic road along the coast south to Ensenada from the morning the next day.

I had not studied the map in details, and therefore it came as a surprise that after passing Mexicali mountains were waiting. Arid desert landscape giving a hint of what Baja California is about.

The scenic road

Tijuana is bigger than I thought, and without paying enough attention to details I missed the first stop on the road to Ensenada, La Jolla, mentioned by Howell, and found myself on the right track not until Rosarito.

Here I visited the creek and the beach/pier adding **Brandt's Cormorant**, **Common Loon**, **Wrentit** and **Purple Finch** to my Mexican list. **Song Sparrow**, a dark **Merlin** and the green type of **Lesser Goldfinch** were good as well. The last one new to me.

A nice spot and funny how the whole atmosphere around Rosarito made me feel like being in California.

What was not so funny was the damage I made to the car when leaving the place. I had parked near the access to the creek, where they rent out horses for walks on the beach and overlooked a wooden post behind me. I didn't even notice it myself and only stopped when the horse people started waving their hands. Ironically they had put the post there to prevent people from destroying a small patch of lawn and flowers. If you ask me, rather the grass than my car. In the moment of writing I'm still waiting for the answer from the insurance company. But I did buy a zero risk extra insurance so I expect it to be a formality to receive the money I had to pay to the rental company for the damage. 928 pesos.

The insurance was more expensive so it turned out to be a bad deal, this time.

Last time I did a trip like this, some years back, I made a serious damage to both doors on the drivers side (with ensurance), and I had really hoped to be able to avoid that kind of self-provoked problems. On the bright side the damage was much smaller this time, and hopefully it follows a trend so that next time I can do it right.

Next stop was río Descanso valley, a good spot that had potential to attract interesting passerines with both orchards and large trees along the creek.

Except from the ever-present **Yellow-rumped Warbler** (audubon type) all I could find was an out-of-range Lucy's Warbler. And 3 **American Crows** adding to the list. 10 **Black Phoebe**s should prove to be a representative of that species in Baja California. Common throughout as was Say's Phoebe in suited habitat. On the contrary, Vermilion



Flycatcher was somewhat rare around here. All in contrast to the situation in Aguascalientes where the Vermilion is a character species and the others not.

Second last stop before hitting Ensenada was Río Guadalupe, a true river mouth good for waterbirds. Mainly gulls and coots when I was there. 700 California, 100 Heerman's and 3 Bonaparte's Gulls being the most noteworthy. And 500 **American Coots**. The **Belding** subspecies of **Savannah Sparrow** was here in good numbers as well as **White-crowned Sparrow** which should prove itself to be one of the most common and white-spread sparrows – mainly of the western taiga type. 2 Elegant Terns over the beach could still attract my attention.

Shortly before reaching Ensenada, el Mirador, a lookout (some hundred meters asl), offers the most spectacular view overlooking the coast and Bahía de Todos Santos. A **Peregrine falcon** was seeking its next meal around the cliffs and a **Black-chinned Hummingbird** happily fed on flowers swaying from the vertical cliffs.

Because of the topography it was not easy to see what was going on along the rocky beach. I'm thinking in regard of species like Surfbird and Wandering Tattler, but since I didn't find them at other suitable coast stretches either during the trip, I probably didn't miss anything. Too early for these perhaps?

Ensenada

Almost two weeks after leaving Aguascalientes I finally reached Ensenada. I had planned to stay here a week to have time to move about and get a feeling of the atmosphere – of course while continuing birding.

There are several good birding spots you can visit out of Ensenada, and with habitats ranging from ocean to mountain, from a birding perspective, it would be an excellent place to live.

Based on Howell I worked my way through the localities during the week.

The harbor became a daily ritual since my hotel was lying right next to the promenade. Winter time and the Pacific Time Zone resulted in the sun rising as early as 600 am, but the town didn't wake up until 800 am, forcing me to do something until my local restaurant Taco Marú opened. An excellent place at the corner of 4th street and Blancarte serving Mexican dishes for the Mexicans.

Tourism is a central part of the economy in Ensenada, but the way it expresses itself in the streets is very special. Sport fishing, wine, sea sports and cruises are the main subjects, and therefore it is probably logical that all the tourist activities are centered toward the harbor. The first two streets running along the waterfront are packed with hotels, bars, restaurants, souvenir shops and so forth, but if you move inland just one or two streets, it changes completely. Not a single tourist facility in sight nor any tourists. As if you had suddenly moved to another city. Very positive in terms of living there.

Unfortunately the harbor is only accessible from the promenade, both cruise and container ship terminals have been closed to the public.

Elegant and Royal Terns, Black Oystercatcher, Belted Kingfisher, Western Grebe and Surf Scoters. Only few gulls with a 1cy **Glaucous-winged Gull** as a highlight. As are the Sea Lions at their private platform in between fishing boats and yachts.

The first morning I decided to visit the San Miguel beach north of town, famous surfer beach, to look for shorebirds, but as they were charging 50 pesos to enter I didn't do it. Instead I went to the other side of the highway up the San Miguel creek which proved to be a great spot. For the first day on this trip it had started raining, but not too heavy, so I decided to keep birding. And the birds apparently loved it. There was activity everywhere in bushes and trees.

California and Spotted Towhee, California Thrasher, Anna' Hummingbird, Western Scrub-Jay, Nuttall's Woodpecker, California Gnatcatcher, Wrenit, Song and White-crowned Sparrows. And a group of **California Quails** kept foraging in the open even though I was only a few meters from them. A great photo opportunity but in the rain I had left the camera in the car. In principle no species is more important than others in respect of photos for my collection, but I guess it is natural to feel an instant attraction toward the 'pretty ones'. Therefore I was really happy the next time I visited the place where, in sun light, I managed to lure out a group in the open while I was hiding under my bag hide and click, click, click...Les agradezco mucho!

I visited the beach another day when the access was free. Both to look for birds but also just to see what it was like, big waves and so, and perhaps a glimpse of Jim Morrison's ghost.

When thinking of surfers my imagination travels to sandy beaches on Hawaii with huge rolling waves, but this was nothing like it. A single surfer was paddling slowly along a stony beach and the waves were modest. Out of season I



guess. The best bird was a **Rock Wren** foraging between the stones and posing well for the camera. And from a nostalgic Danish viewpoint the **European Starlings** that seemed to be pretty common throughout the north of Mexico.

Another good spot north of Ensenada is the fishing harbor at El Sauzal.

Gulls is the main thing here. At the most 8000 Western Gulls and 2000 Heerman's Gulls, spiced up with a single 1cy Bonaparte's and a 1cy Glaucous-winged. And 6 Black Turnstones.

As in Ensenada there is no public access to the harbor, so you have to watch from the beach or the road parallel to it. Definitely the best place around Ensenada to study gulls and with more patience and a tripod for the telescope (!) who knows what I might have found.

On google map I had seen that at the northeast corner of Ensenada there was a reservoir that looked interesting, E.L. Zamora. I thought it could be an ideal quick-stop-after-work locality if one moved here one day to stay. So I went there to check it out. It held various ducks and grebes and some cormorants. Among these 'real' **Mallards**. What a joy! My first in Mexico. 50 **Lesser Scaups** troubled me at first. The problem with this locality is the bad access. You have to stay on the road passing on the west side or perhaps one could find way to the other side entering the very modest(!) looking community there. Or one could bring a tripod for his telescope so that he wasn't limited to using the roof of the car as a base!

The Scaups I think I managed to determine both as Ring-necked Duck and Redheads before I finally moved to a spot where I could hand-held the telescope against a wired fence and get a decent look.

The whole coastline around Ensenada of course is one big locality with grebes, ducks and loons roosting on the water. You can stop at various places to scan the ocean. I did it to some extent but again: handicapped by the lack of a tripod I focused differently and have probably missed something.

South of Ensenada in the valley of Maneadero the landscape changes and you find a large complex of agricultural fields. Raptors, pipits, larks, and blackbirds should be seeked here, and the area will probably be better than what I experienced when the rain sets in. In contrary to most of mainland Mexico where the rainy season takes place during the summer months it doesn't start until November here in Baja California.

Red-tailed Hawk, White-tailed Kite, American Pipit, Horned Lark and Western Meadowlark amongst...

Estero Punta Banda

Adjacent to the Maneadero fields you find the Punta Banda estuary, the overall best birding locality around Ensenada. Waterbirds of all kinds abound. There is access from both the land and the coastal side. At high tide the birds stayed in the tall vegetation along the land side shore making them more difficult to see and count, but the ones visible also easier to photograph. Especially a small group of **Clapper Rails** cooperated well. The high tide had forced them to seek shelter very close to the shore in some grassy 'islands'. They actually swim, I didn't know that, but apparently it is not what they prefer. I took off my shoes and socks and started wading through the water to get closer. Very slowly with little movement while clicking away expecting them to take off every moment. Some of them started to move away swimming, but the closest didn't seem to know what to do. It moved restlessly but decided to stay put, and finally I let it be already having the photos I wanted. A sign of trust in me of course.

In general the south side spit is the best place to overlook the estuary. At the beginning you find some small ponds where shorebirds, grebes, skimmers, ducks and loons can be observed at close to medium-close range. In the estuary itself it is different. When the tides is low and most birds are present, the flats are extensive and the birds spread out over a large area stretching along the estuary several kilometers toward the opening at the sea. Larger birds can still be determined of course but sandpipers and smaller plovers for example can be a challenge. Noteworthy: 150 **Long-billed Curlews**, 1200 **Marbled Godwits**, 800 **Willetts**, 600 **Short-billed Dowitchers**, 250 **Western Sandpipers**, 50 **Red Knots**, 50 **Dunlins**, 100 **Forster's Terns** and a single **Clark's Grebe**.

I also saw a few **Long-billed Dowitchers**. They stayed at the small ponds, where I could see and hear them well, while the Short-billed were spread out over the flats. Even though the general opinion says that Dowitchers in basic plumage only can be identified by voice, I want to state, for the record, that knowing the Long-billed rather well from Aguascalientes, it is my impression that the short-billed has a browner and brighter appearance.

Another (apparently) difficult species pair is Western and Clark's Grebe. The few Clark's I've seen in California I



remember as having a prominent yellow bill. So that was what I was looking for here and elsewhere on the trip in search of this species (and hadn't found), but it was not until I reread Sibley that I realized that it was other details that would determine whether it was a Western, a Clark or an intermediate. The amount of black around the eyes being essential. So I've determined one individual, from a picture I took, as a Clark's. One day the photo will be available here, and you can see for yourself whether I'm right or not.

Something that surprised me was the poor number of ducks I saw here. Not a single Wigeon and only few of the other dabbling ducks, 47 **Northern Pintails** being the most. 50 Surf Scoters were present both days near the ocean and on the first visit 3 Scaups were with them that probably were Greater, but too far away to ID them properly. Again, I think I have been tainted by Howell's list expecting some of the rarer species. 21 **Red-breasted Mergansers** were present though.

Along the spit houses stretch for some kilometers reaching a dead end. From here it is possible to walk further on (several kilometers I think) toward the point and the sea mouth. I didn't do it, mostly because of lack of time. I think it could have been interesting to see what would be resting on the water out there. Probably thousands and thousands of all the good duckies that I missed ;-). Pronatura Noroeste has made a rudimentary track through the vegetation with educational signs explaining about the plants as you walk along.

A total of 67 species was the result after two visits. Comparing with data that has been entered in ebird from this locality, it looks like my theory about several species arriving later from north, is correct.

If you stay at the estuary until sunset and have to drive back to Ensenada in the dark, be aware that you'll find 2 or 3 unwarned topes on the road toward the Ensenada highway.

Continuing toward the inlet Punta Banda from the south side access road to the estuary, you eventually end at the tourist attraction La Bufadora (the blowhole). I don't think it was 'working' when I was there, but since I didn't walk the last 100 meters to the observation platforms, I can't really tell. The massive amount of souvenir stands, restaurants, a general bad taste and insisting persons made me decide not to go.

In terms of birding that was not a minus, since the interesting birding at this spot is focused on the rocky coast in the cove away from the blowhole. Black and **American Oystercatchers**, Brandt' and **Pelagic Cormorant** were my highlights. Howell mentioned that one could also see seabirds from here, but being on the south side and with a very enclosed view of the ocean I think you should be very lucky or very patient to add these birds to your list from here. If you look at a map though, the inlet itself indeed looks like the perfect spot to do land based seabird watching. Forming the south side of Bahía de Todos Santos and protruding well into the ocean, I had imagined to spend a good many hours here sea watching.

In fact this was a major reason why I wanted to come to Ensenada. To me this kind of birdwatching ranges among the greatest experiences at all. All active migration is interesting but there is something more complete about this type of bird watching: The comfort of not having to move about to get to the birds is one thing, beautiful views of the dramatic ocean another (in Denmark we would mainly do this kind of birdwatching during stormy weather), and then this thrilling sensation when you sit there patiently scanning the water and suddenly something moves into the view, rapidly or not, passing between the waves only revealing itself in short intervals. It is fascinating and fun - and at times frustrating! You have to calculate where the bird will expose itself the next time and at the same time capture enough details to ID it correctly. I love it.

With this in mind I had hoped to find such an ideal spot here near Ensenada so that I, if I decide to move here, would have the opportunity to do seabird watching whenever possible.

Unfortunately it was not possible from Punta Banda. Or: There is a road on the north side of the inlet and it looked like it was leading all the way toward the end, but it was closed by a gate. I tried to ask about it, and got the impression that it is a permanent arrangement. Too bad.

But perhaps one could still do some good seabird watching with the right weather conditions. The weather and the ocean was calm when I was there, and scanning the water my general impression was very little movement along or close to the shore. So one would have to wait for the weather to change, westerly strong winds, and then perhaps it would be possible that the bay would trap birds passing by, and one could find a sheltered watch point somewhere along the shoreline south of Ensenada.



Laguna Hanson

The last birding spot out of Ensenada was Laguna Hanson in the mountains toward the east.

If you don't like driving under difficult conditions I recommend that you leave Ensenada either before the sun gets up or not until after the sun has lifted itself well into the sky. If you leave early in the morning just when the sun rises, you will have to drive with the low sun directly in your face and the road being very winding, in places, like driving in the blind, it is extremely uncomfortably.

The access road toward the lake is about 25 km and completely washboarded. Driving back I did the road in one stretch and it took me one hour!

Going up there I stopped at 'Howell's' places: The first stop being an oak grove where the best was **Oak Titmouse**.

Others were **Scott's Oriole**, the green form of Lesser Goldfinch, **Red-naped Sapsucker** and many Western Scrub-Jays. A very pale **American Robin** made me wonder what makes it different from the 'San Lucas ' Robin in the south of Baja California which is treated as a special form (sometimes species).

Most of the road passes through dense chaparral, difficult to bird, and the morning being rather windy I drove on until reaching the pine zone close to the lake.

A species I really wanted to see was Pinyon Jay which we didn't find when I visited California some years ago. Therefore a lifer awaiting.

The first stops didn't give anything, not a single bird, and with the wind I felt a little pessimistic. Of course it often is like this in the mountains. It appears completely dead, and then out of the blue...

I passed a small ranch called Rayos, the road bend softly and then, puff, a large flock of black birds was whirling about on the road seeking and foraging. I stopped to check them out. **Brewer's Blackbirds**. A nice species that I have only seen a few times in Aguascalientes in winter. A strange place to see a species that I associate with open farmland, not a mountainous pine forest. And then suddenly I heard the others. One, two and more. Sounding a little like Eurasian Jackdaws I knew it instantly and was happy when I saw the first **Pinyon Jays** entering the scene. A fine little Jay with its frosted blue color. And they kept coming. The forest became alive. One by one they moved constantly from one tree to the other making it difficult to get a good photo opportunity though they were very close. Also because they constantly managed to stay in the shadow of the tall trees. I estimated some 100 in all. I followed them for a while as they traveled through the forest, but finally they decided to take off quickly to where they came from. The Blackbirds had gone as well. But taking that I still missed the real locality of the day, the lake, I didn't complain. I had seen them well and I had an acceptable photo to add to the collection, so better be it, if I could move on.

I started my return toward the car, and passing a clearing I saw some Lesser Goldfinches foraging on a group of thistles. Apparently there was nothing else with them, but then I heard this call that sounded different from the call of the Lesser but still like a Carduelis, and looking up, there it was, a new lifer: **Lawrence's Goldfinch**. Males and females, a small flock. And small birds indeed. I struggled to get some photos, but only managed to get a few documentaries as they stayed up the tree in the shade.

What I hoped to be a Gilded Flicker then followed me back to the car, but I could only squeeze a **Northern Flicker** out of it when I saw it well. Gilded should be found further south but one can always hope, right?

Soon after, I arrived at the lake. At first a little confused by the entrance signs whether I should actually register and pay to enter the park. But with nobody around and no ticketing facilities I just drove on. Could always act like a dumb tourist if it would be a problem later.

The lake is lying in beautiful surroundings in a rocky boulder setting and spread out firs and pines. You can camp there if you bring all your gear, but then you probably have to pay.

You can drive all the way around the lake (about 50 hectares (123 acres)). The grassed down shores makes it easy to find the right spot to scan for birds. Waterbirds of course: 6 Anas and 4 Aythya ducks with **Gadwall** and **Canvasback** being four species and Ruddy Duck, Mallard, Northern Pintail and **American Wigeon** the most numerous duck in that order while American Coot was the most numerous of all with about 2000 individuals. 20 Ring-necked Ducks and 15 Redheads should be mentioned as well.

Again I had hoped for some of the rarer species from north but got nothing like it. Around the lake the most conspicuous species was **Western Bluebird** -55. 6 **Mountain Bluebirds** were also present. These stay in the open while the Western liked to stay closer to the trees and bushes while not foraging in the open. Northern Raven 80 and Pygmy Nuthatch with 30 were also common as was Yellow-rumped Warbler- 40. Again only of the audubon type. No doubt that YRW is the most widespread and common warbler in Mexico in winter.



When I was about to leave, a strange looking Peregrine showed up, and after checking the photos I've come to the conclusion that it must have been a juvenile intermediate between tundrius and anatum. Of course you will never have the opportunity to see for yourselves because, full of initiative as I am, the photos no longer exist...They weren't good photos but still, the whole idea about making it possible to add photos to records in my registration software, is to be able to document your observations, meaning that it is a very good idea to stay away from the delete button in time, despite the good intentions about trimming your archive.

And then Ensenada was over. 136 species during this week isn't much, but the potential is a lot bigger. And with a good variation among the localities one could definitely find enough to do throughout the year. Only real drawback was the lack of access to Punta Banda, but I'm sure that with a little exploration of the area it would be able to find a good spot to watch seabirds. In fact, I talked to some fishermen and they told me that Punta Colonet further south toward Bahía San Quintín would be that kind of place. To be proven one day.

Bahía San Quintín

This day could have been the next day because instead of being satisfied with visiting the Ensenada area, it was too tempting not to go the 200 kilometers further south to visit two major localities in Baja California: Parque Nacional San Pedro Mártir and Bahía San Quintín. I didn't go to Colonet though. I felt I had to stick to my itinerary, since I still had a long way to go.

Bahía San Quintín is the most important wintering site for Black-bellied Brants and that was the main reason why I wanted to go there.

Just north of the Bahía I visited la laguna Figueroa which according to Howell should be a good place for Mountain Plover during winter. I didn't see any so perhaps mid November is not winter enough for that species either.

Beside a few ghosts walking about in the open low salt vegetation, shorebirds was the main thing around the shallow lake, but still just a modest collection of common sandpipers. 30 Long-billed Dowitchers were most noteworthy. The lake lies just behind the coast at the foot of the sand dunes. In your Toyota 4runner you could probably climb them without problems, but I had to walk. At first without telescope because at this point I had learned not to expect to see anything of interest close to shore. But perhaps such a negative attitude can only be justified close to Ensenada, because getting a clear view of the ocean, I could see many Scoters lying close to shore. The male Surf Scoters were easy enough to find and the accompanying blacker birds most likely being females, but without a telescope it could not be excluded that a little surprise would be hiding for me. So I went back to get the scope and my jacket.

Without the car to use as tripod and bare sand as long as the eye could reach on top of the dune, I had to lie flat down to get a solid base for the scope, therefore the jacket as protection from the anarchistic sand grains that do not show any consideration whatsoever. You move a little to find a better position and get at better view, and vupti, half the beach is lying atop the jacket threatening to invade the fragile parts of your scope as well. I guess it is the same mechanism as when you walk through dry weedy scrub and even though you have tied your shoe firmly end up with a bunch of twigs and spines inside it. I wonder what the name of that universal law is.

Anyway, the scope did not reveal other ducks than SS, but it did reveal a Common Loon and a **Black-vented Shearwater** just behind the surf. A good surprise. Maybe a coincidence or maybe one can learn the dynamics and nature of the sea to know where the seabirds will come close to shore on a regular basis, because the weather was completely quite, so the Shearwater would have had to actively get there. Unless it had stayed there since the last storm;)))

I had only planned with one night here in the south to cover the park and the bay so I hurried on to the north side of the bay from where several lookouts should be good for Brants.

Actually I only hurried until I reached the access road from the highway. From thereon the road, running for more than 10 kilometers, was replaced by the second worst washboard of the trip (the road to laguna Hanson being the worst). It's not so much the movements as the fear of the car literally falling apart that makes me prefer a good potholed road instead of, if I have to choose from two evils.

Finally I reached the bay and found a small track allowing me to park right by the water with several hundred **Brants** in front of me and the sun in the back. Perfect. Howell says that the geese are very wary because of the hunting around the bay (I'm not sure if it legal to hunt the geese themselves). But this was not my experience. There was a flock of about



100 birds less than a hundred meters from me, on the water, and they didn't move much when I got out of the car. There were dabbling ducks present also, but the Brants dominated completely. I guess I don't have to mention that no rare ducks were around.

I focused on the geese and got a few photos of the ones lying close to me, but after a while with limited action on the water, I started taking pictures of a group of Western Sandpipers foraging at the waters edge in front of me. They too seemed very confident with my presence. Click click, and then suddenly all the Brants started complaining and took flight simultaneously. The air filled with geese in panic flying in all directions over the water, and I was instantly aware that such a behavior could only be caused by human presence or a really big predator. And that it was. From the north side of the bay it came directly toward me without giving attention to the geese at all: An adult **Golden Eagle**. It passed above me with no hesitation and headed toward the hills between the bay and the coast. I got my photos, a little dark, but very happy to be the right man on the right spot at the right time.

Here I could have decided to return to have more time on the south side, but I felt very animated and stuck to my plan about going to el Pedregal as mentioned in Howell.

Not really sure if I found the right place, but I ended up further south on the coast overlooking another part of the bay and what I believe to be the major part of all the Brants wintering here. Near and far they covered the water. About 11000 in all. Also a fair number of American Wigeons but still no Eurasian between them.

I was surprised to see how bright the geese looked when lying on the water, especially at a distance. Almost like Common Shelducks. I'm not sure if Dark-bellied or perhaps Light-bellied have ever been registered in Mexico. I looked for them, but didn't find any. Half an hour enjoying the sight, and then it was back on the washboard...

The first of 6 **Prairie Falcon** of the trip, an adult, was also present

It was already late when I reached the road on the south side of the bay. It was my plan to find the hotel Linda that Howell mentions before doing more birding. But I couldn't find it, searching, while time ticking away. Finally I went along the road to where the hotel was supposed to be, though the name on the signs was different. It turned out that the hotel was there, lying on the coast with a beautiful view, it had just got a different name. The second or third after the name La Linda. Now it was called Misión Santa María, an old convent. Not cheap but with a good location close to the birding it was a good choice. And you could eat at the restaurant on site.

After checking in I went to the small pond close by. Various ducks were present but nothing new. After scanning the ocean, I only had about an hour of daylight left, but still I decided to try for the fishing camp at the end of the spit. I followed the directions in Howell but after a few hundred meters along the sand track leading there, I had to give up because the road looked too bad. The place is very isolated and not where you want to get stuck. I turned around and went for the salt marsh toward the north, where Black Rails should be found. Not that I had any serious expectations about finding it. Not at this time of year and not like this, cruising about here and there relying only on pure luck. But of course you always have a little part of you open for exactly that kind of wonders. I ended up at the coast as it was getting dark and a young fisherman was returning with the days harvest. In the twilight I could see many Marbled Godwits resting along the coast, but the fisherman told me that if I wanted to see many birds, I should go to the other place – over there – pointing in direction of the fishing camp where I tried to go earlier. I told him that the road was too soft for my car, but he assured me that the surface was hard enough. If that was true, then I would try to go there in the morning, I told him. He didn't comment verbally, but I sensed that he was thinking something, as if what I had just said, was not a good idea. I didn't ask into it, because I wanted to go there no matter what. He left, and in the last daylight I sat down to scan the small mud flat in front of me, in hope of a little black thing popping out of the vegetation. But no.

The whole southern spit is rather flat covered with low salt marsh vegetation, and on my way back, in the distance, I could see a car returning from what had to be the fishing camp. I decided to wait for him to see from where he would come out, so that I didn't have to fool around the next morning wasting time.

Howell says that from the paved east-west access road you should continue straight ahead when you reach the point where the road bares left toward another hotel. That was what I had done earlier, but when the car appeared it was not from there but from one of the tracks left of the one going straight ahead.

So, when you come to this point where the road bends to the left, a little further ahead you have a 4-toothed fork: The right one leads toward the salt marshes to the north. The one straight ahead might lead to somewhere but not easily in an ordinary car, and the two left-side tracks lead toward the fishing camp. I took the inner-most of the the two left-side tracks, but when I returned I go out on the road leading to that other hotel. Therefore I think you can choose from a maze of tracks as long as you keep to the left from where the access road bends to the left.



The next morning I got up early. It was still my intention to go to the national park today too, so I had to take advantage of the light as early as possible. I took off in the dark and bumbled my way several kilometers toward the camp. As the light started to appear few Dunlins and Black-bellied Plovers flew up along the road. And then it was that the fisherman's silent reaction yesterday started to make sense to me: The fog came in and the visibility dropped to just about useless from a birding point of view!

Finally a small light house emerged and barking dogs and a fire told me that I had reach the camp. Several fishermen were already there preparing their boats and gear while the smoke from a rubber tire bonfire filled the air. Good morning we said and so on, as more over-sized pickup trucks arrived.

The fog got worse and it was frustrating only to be able to hear the gulls flying along the coast 50 meters away and not see them.

The clock was about 7 am and I asked the guys when we could expect the fog to disappear if at all. Some of them assured me that it would happen in about an hour and a half. I then took a walk along the shore in the direction where they had told me the majority of the birds would be resting, just to kill time, and as the fog waved in and out, I could see good numbers of Elegant Terns and Western Gulls resting.

One and a half hour later it was clear that the typical Mexican rather-over-optimistic-than-realistic syndrome had caught the fishermen, and I returned to rest a bit and try for a more realistic answer. The fishermen had now left the camp and only the watchman was left with his 5 dogs. He offered me a cup of coffee, which I had to reject since I've decided not to consume that bitter black substance in this lifetime, and assured me that eventually the fog would disappear – maybe in an hour or two...

I had to rethink the situation.

When planning to do both the south side of the bay and the San Pedro Mártir park in one day, it was on the condition that I could start very early, at six o'clock when the sun got up. Now I had to change my plans because it was very late, and I had still not seen anything around here. But to leave the bay now with nothing seen would most likely make it a double dip ,since I would need about 2-3 hours to reach the park entrance, meaning that I would arrive around noon or later, which we all know is when the birding is low. So I decided that it would be worth spending the extra time and money, and find a hotel near the access road toward the park from where I could start the next day. And then accept to wait here in a calm state of mind.

While I waited by the car I was lucky that a few Belding's Savannah Sparrows were foraging close by as was a Horned Lark of the Californian coastal subspecies both of which allowed me to take some photos.

And then finally: At 10 o'clock the fog lifted, and I left the watchman to find a good spot along the beach.

Gulls, skimmers and terns on the beach with a variety of shorebirds. The gulls were mostly Western, about 400, and the terns a surprisingly large flock of Elegant Terns, 110. Normally such a large flock of 'red-billed' terns would be Royal Terns when seen through my binoculars, so it was funny to see the larger Royals well outnumbered this time. Among the Skimmers a juvenile was banded, and the bander told me later that it had been banded at Salton Sea, California earlier this year.

Snowy Plover was the most common shorebird on the beach with about 40. But the best shorebird this day, or of the entire trip, was a juvenile **Red Phalarope** approaching from the water and landing some 4 meters from me in the sand in complete confidence. A long awaited lifer it was, and I loved it for posing so well. A photographic beauty.

On the water Surf Scoters and Common Loons were the most common while a Brandt's Cormorant swimming very close to the shore allowed me to tick off another photo species.

Under some circumstances a car roof is actually perfect to use as base for your telescope, at least if you're as tall as I am, and can lean toward the car while scoping. It is just that you have to be careful choosing your support for the scope. Driving around these places where sand was omnipresent, the sandpaper effect on the polish and painting of the car is unavoidable. I used a towel inside a plastic bag, but as I, in the heat of the game, sometimes forgot to lift the package to change the viewing direction, I admit that I scratched the roof... uuf. In various places. I guess I'll never be the type who spend long Sunday afternoons nursing and cleaning my car beyond the extent that is needed to make it do its job well, meaning driving without problems. But I am the type who likes honest and straight lines, so had it come to it, and I had to pay for this as a damage to the car, I would have done it without complaints. They didn't charge me for it though. Maybe because I already had to pay an amount for the rear end damage, OR perhaps because they didn't see it. An average Mexican is too short to see atop a normal car roof without making an effort.



So there I was scanning the water in my effort to find some new species. Especially some of the duck I still hadn't seen. No luck on these, but then some hundred meters from the shore a little black thing was floating slowly toward the east. At first I thought it was some kind of auk, but the strange shape with a small but prominent head lifted high and the elongated tail finally made me realize that it was Storm-petrel. Perfect. At least a new Mexican species or perhaps a lifer. Several Storm-petrels can be seen in these waters, so naming it should be done with care. But we all know that too much care makes life boring and your lists short, so I was eager to give it a name. In comparison with some nearby ducks it looked rather big and with the long tail and a general brownish plumage I felt more or less confident that it had to be a **Leach's Storm-Petrel**. So I named it, accepting that it would only be a new Mexico species this time.

Looking in my notebook here afterward I'm a bit surprised to see that I decided to leave the place already about noon. I admit the species list is rather modest except from my two new species, but my impression thinking back is of a very beautiful and interesting place which would probably have produced more if I had given it time. In fact the bay area in general is ranking in the absolute top if I had to rate all localities on this trip. Though not untouched by human hands at least it appeared unspoiled. A true gem.

But I guess the nature of traveling made me move on. Optimistic about what would be waiting around the next corner.

Driving back toward the highway, I birded a little along the road where tall cypresses looked like a good place for passerines. But only Song Sparrows, more Yellow-rumped Warblers and a young Red-tailed Hawk. The last stop in the bay area was the beach near hotel Misión Santa María. Howell says it is a good place for Red-throated Loons, but a visit in the early afternoon is not recommendable because of the sun reflecting in the water, makes it almost impossible to get good views of the what birds might be present. And also because the beach is used by the locals and too crowded. I left soon without adding anything of interest.

When driving south two days earlier I didn't pay that much attention to hotels along the highway, since I didn't plan on using them. So now that I was driving north toward the San Pedro Mártir National Park, I had to rely on the good fortune to find one. Of course I could have stayed at the same hotel another night, and do the 50 kilometers north in the morning before dawn, but for some reason that thought didn't occur to me until it was too late. By advice from a gas pump dude near the access road toward the park, I found a new motel a few kilometers to the north making it perfect as a base for the next days adventure, motel Paraíso Colonét. 600 pesos.

Parque Nacional San Pedro Mártir

The access road to the park is about 90 kilometers. Today it is fortunately paved all the way, making it an easy and comfortable ride.

I followed the directions by Howell stopping along the road with focus on species I hadn't yet seen, like Grey Thrasher and Mountain Quail.

The Thrasher is more of a lowland species and should be searched at the beginning of the road where cacti habitat is present. The conditions were excellent I think, a quite morning with the early sun hitting the cacti, and I could easily imagine the birds sitting in the top of a cactus soaking up the first rays of sun. But it remained an imagination. They would not appear. But further ahead, as a compensation I think, a California Thrasher did the imagined posing and a little further ahead a waauiii suddenly appeared: **Sage Thrasher**. A lifer, making it easier to give up on the Grey Thrasher which is at its northernmost limit here anyway.

With only one day at my disposal, and time speeding away, from here I drove ahead almost without stopping until I reached the pines close to the park. On the way up in all 80 California Quails is worth mentioning, but zero Mountain Quails is not!

And then a single California Quail that did not look good after a kiss of death from Mister Attitude...I'm sorry.

Also 310 Mourning Doves in the lowland should be mentioned. The largest gathering I've seen in Mexico until date though it is numerous in Aguascalientes too.

At a bend ascending the pine part road before the park Cedar Waxwings, Dark-eyed Juncos of townsendii subspecies, Mountain Chickadees and Pine Siskin mixed in with a bunch of curious little Chipmunks.

The park entrance is 50 pesos. You can camp at designated places or stay at the cabins at the headquarter. Inside the park the main road toward the observatory is also paved so you can smooth ahead all the way to the top...

One of my target species was Cassin's Finch. In Howell the winter range covers about the north half of the country.



Therefore, theoretically, it should be possible to find it, for example in Aguascalientes where I live, too. But since I haven't seen it before, I was not sure whether I would be able to recognize it in the field when seeing it. In Sibley it looks rather straight forward to separate House and Cassin's Finches, but knowing how different a House Finch can look, I could suspect a Cassin's to be variable as well.

Therefore the best way to start, was to get to see it where it is known to be present, like here in the park.

I parked at the camp site close to the entrance and started walking toward la torre de piedra which the warden told me was a lookout from where they could scan the horizon for forest fires.

I walked and there was nothing, and I kept on walking and there was still nothing. Ooooo. But then pop pop, activity up a tree, sounding finch-like and yes: A small group of **Cassin's Finches** were foraging above me. The males looked very much like in Sibley – straight forward. But the females looked a bit odd, and it was not until I compared the photos with the book, that I was sure of their id. I don't know if they mix up with House or Purple Finches or if any of these could be present here at all.

In Sibley the female Cassin's has a rather bright head the same color as the neck and chest, but what I saw was a strong contrast between a dark greyish head and a bright neck and chest, giving them a characteristic look, very different from all the female House Finches I have seen. The rest of the bird looked like Sibley's illustration.

If this proves to be a qualitative way of distinguishing Cassin's females from the other red finches, then I'm confident that I will nail them easily if we ever meet in Ags or elsewhere.

I kept walking for what seemed a long time trying to find that lookout, but gave up at last. Beside the finches, a few Cedar Waxwings, Mountain Chickadees and a single **Hairy Woodpecker** were all I saw from this track. Not much so I decided to continue.

I wanted to go to the astronomic observatory, the highest point accessible in the park. From there it should be possible to see both the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Cortéz on the gulf side on a clear day. I like that kind of stuff.

According to Howell the last stretch before the observatory should be the best place to see Lawrence's Finches, but since I had already seen it, there was nothing in particular in terms of birding that made me want to go up there. And even less afterward.

The park road winds its way up and down through a healthy pine forest passing through meadows to end after some 10 kilometers at the entrance to the observatory complex.

For some reason visitors can't drive all the way up to the telescopes, one large and two minor, so one has to park and walk up the road about one and a half kilometers. A strange disposition since the observatory is open to the public every day between 10 am and 1 pm. I mean: It is not very likely that old Mrs Molly has the energy to do the walk even if she is the most ardent aficionada of black holes, galaxies and shooting stars!

I did the walk and the view up there indeed is fantastic. Especially toward the gulf side. The multi-colored desert landscapes glowing in the sun with the ocean in the distance were incredible beautiful. To the other side a thick layer of fog had covered everything along the coast and it looked like we were well above the clouds. To the southeast the massif with the highest point, pico del diablo was also impressive to watch. Unfortunately it was not possible to get a clear view of the horizons because the observatory was surrounded by tall trees. But we can't complain about that, can we?!

The birding along the road was near to zero. Being midday and windy this was probably the reason, but no matter what I think I'll spend my energy somewhere else in the park the next time.

With only limited time, and birding seemingly modest, driving down from the observatory I didn't know what to do. I didn't feel like walking far just to see few species that I had already seen. Then I tried a side road off the meadows, but didn't go far since it was not suited for a normal car, and I had a suspicion I was not allowed to drive there. Only designated roads I had been told at the entrance. So I returned.

A Mountain Bluebird was foraging along the road as were some 35 **Pine Siskins**. The latter was more than welcomed since it was only my second record in Mexico, the first being in Veracruz. They were very focused on food searching but still they had an eye on me as well, always keeping a distance. So only bad photos.

I returned to the entrance in hope of finding two of the sparrows that I still hadn't seen. Fox and Golden-crowned Sparrows. They should be around in winter both of them. Fox also breeding.

No luck with these though, but I stumbled upon another big flock of Pinyon Jays just before the entrance. I estimated some 100. The behavior was the same as at Laguna Hanson: Passing one by one flickering hither and forth.



I left the park after 4-5 hours in the middle of the afternoon which of course is a ridiculously short time to spend on such a pristine locality. I'll return another time in spring-summer and planning with enough time to camp.

Poor birding being one reason for leaving soon, a second reason was the long way I had to drive toward Ensenada where I planned to spend the next night, and a third reason was the California Condor! For some years a reintroduction program has been in effect resulting in some 20 free flying individuals living in these mountains at this moment. Though the camp where they breed the birds is located close to the park, the released birds are more often seen at lower elevations. Of course 'often' is relative. One does not often see these birds. I didn't either, but at least I wanted to give them a try while driving down from the park. Instead I got to see two beautiful Coyotes passing the road and later in the dark, 3 owls were caught in the head lights. One probably being a Burrowing and the other two either Barn or a Screech-Owl.

Driving back in the dark apparently wasn't a problem since I haven't got any memory of the trip at all. Back in Ensenada I found a more modest hotel this time. 350 pesos a night including smoking and beer-drinking Americans in the courtyard till late. Charming. Originally I had planned on choosing another hotel that was advertising with a price of 190 pesos a night from a big red neon sign at the edge of the town. All booked though, but the man told me that the price mentioned was only for 4 hours...One starts thinking, right?

Ojos Negros

So now it was time to drive back toward mainland Mexico doing the following steps: Aberts Towhee on the road between Mexicali and San Felipe, doubling back toward Caborca and further east, I was hoping for a Bendire's Thrasher without knowing any specific locality though. From there I would head to Agua Prieta near the US border to try for species like Baird's Sparrow, Longspurs and Juniper Titmouse. Lake Janos in Chihuahua would be next, hoping for Snow and Ross Geese, Common Merganser, Bald Eagle and perhaps a Rough-legged Hawk. And after a long drive to Saltillo in Coahuila the trip would end, hopefully with a Worthen's Sparrow closing up the list.

But first the fields around Ojos Negros on the way to Laguna Hanson and San Felipe should have a chance to give me a few more species.

Farmland and winter in general is a good combination and a mix of blackbirds, pipits, larks, shorebirds and raptors could be expected.

In particular I was hoping for Tricolored Blackbird, Mountain Plover, Ferruginous and Rough-legged Hawk. The maze of roads east and north of the village are broad and easy to navigate, but the rather heavy traffic was a surprise and a bit of a nuisance with dust lifting from the road, so the camera constantly had to be protected. The area is open and flat so it is easy to scan it for flying raptors which I did, and found several White-tailed Kites, Red-tailed Hawks, **Northern Harriers** and finally 2 juvenile and 2 adult **Ferruginous Hawks**.

A large flock of black birds was foraging a few 'blocks' away, and while approaching it I could see that it consisted mostly of European Starlings (1000) and Brewers Blackbirds (2000). A few **Red-winged Blackbirds** (100) were present with their orange-red scapulars and then 2 male **Tricolored Blackbirds**, colored in red and white of course as a tribute to my Danish background.

Reading Sibley I was surprised to see that he depicts the male Brewer's Blackbird as having both a basic and alternate plumage. After being aware of it, every time I saw Brewers I tried to find some that looked like his basic birds, but never could. All the male birds had a complete black and glossy plumage with no sign of transition whatsoever. Does this mean that they do not acquire basic plumage until later in the year or what? That would be rather unusual I think, taking into consideration that we were already writing November 17th.

Mountain Plover remained a dream species after this visit, which I ended at 1020 to move on toward the other localities Howell mentions from the road toward San Felipe.

All of them being reservoirs and the first one being that at the village Héroes de la Independencia.

A good variety of both dabbling and diving ducks were present, but nothing new. 16 **Greater White-fronted Geese** were though. I knew they would take off if I approached them to get a photo, but still I did it. Lack of moral? Perhaps a little, but I'm a photo hunter as well as a considerate birdwatcher and if it doesn't physically hurt or exhaust them I go



forth!

3 Harris's Hawks were soaring and a Prairie Falcon flew over, both raptors always a pleasure to watch. 2 **Gila Woodpeckers** only half-heartedly volunteered to pose for the camera while 21 Long-billed Dowitcher was the second most numerous bunch on this trip. A good little locality.

The next reservoir confused me and I skipped it: According to Howell it used to be a good wintering site for Tundra Swan, but I'm pretty sure it isn't anymore. I managed to see only a snippet of the reservoir from the road while driving, but it was completely surrounded by thick tall thorn forest, and I couldn't imagine a swan voluntarily choosing this site for any reason. Too dangerous.

So I continued to the last reservoir. I'm almost 100 % sure that I did find the right spot, but the reservoir wasn't there. Not anymore. Vegetation had grown here too, and it looked like it had been a long time ago since the reservoir had dried out.

Campo Mosqueda

And so the Baja birding ended. Almost. San Felipe was originally part of my itinerary, mostly because of gulls and a hope to find seabirds or alcids. But to pay for another night in the opposite direction from home, now with a general impression that these birds were not at their peak performance this time of year, I decided to turn left instead of right at the San Felipe road junction, and headed north toward campo Mosqueda at km 50, where I expected to find an Abert's Towhee.

The ride north along this stretch is simply amazing. Arid desert in various forms between endless salt flats and bare hills of dark red rock, one looking as impressive as the Cheops Pyramid in Egypt.

The camp appeared to be an American trailer park-like hangout. The reed fringed canal/river in front of the camp was a pretty good place. With the 5 most common herons present (you guess or check out my observations from locality Campo Mosqueda to find out which) I was hoping also to be able to flush a Least Bittern from the reeds, but no.

The Towhee was not around either, at least that's what it seemed. Close to where I parked along the canal some bushes looked like the ideal spot for Towhee to hang out, but I could neither see nor hear any. This would mean a major dip since I had not planned to visit other places to find it and it was getting late. I know I had already missed several other species but this one together with Gambel's Quail and the California-named species in my opinion was a must on a first time visit to this part of the country.

Without much hope and as a final shot I grabbed my phone, and started to playback the call. At first nothing but then suddenly a response, and out from the closest bush popped a beautiful **Abert's Towhee**. And it even posed well for the photographer for some minutes before disappearing again. A wonder, nothing less.

After that, a few **Caspian Terns** also wanted to contribute to my photo collection, and it was therefore with a very grateful attitude that I drove my Attitude into the darkness and headed toward Mexicali.

Heading east

On my way north toward Ensenada I had used the toll roads whenever possible. Mostly based on an idea that it would be faster and easier. But also more expensive.

All toll roads in Mexico are doubled by a free highway, so that you can choose to travel without paying anything.

Where the toll roads often have at least two lane in each direction and often are separated, the free highways most often only have one in each direction and they are never separated. Thus making it much more dangerous to travel, especially at night.

But if you are willing to take that risk, then you'll actually find a road system where the quality often, I admit not always, is as good as the toll road system.

Many places the two roads are running parallel to each other, and you can't help smiling a little when you continue driving while the toll roaders have to stop to pay at the toll booths.

Naturally the toll roads in general are faster and probably also easier to find, but if you're willing to spend a little extra time, then you can save money. From Aguascalientes to Ensenada I paid about 1000 pesos.

So I went for the free roads from now on. Or at least I intended to do so. The first toll road to skip was from Mexicali to San Luis Río Colorado. It felt a little foolish passing the exit to continue towards downtown Mexicali to find 'la libre' as the free highway is called. But I continued and finally saw new signs toward SL Río Colorado. But it was dark now and road constructions caused deviations and we drove off in a direction that my sense of direction did not approve of. But at last the road signs really said what I wanted to read, and I continued more relaxed.

I was pretty sure that I was driving along the free highway, but suddenly a toll booth showed up ahead. Driving back the



same way to be able to respect my decision on choosing free roads of course would be ridiculous at this point, and I paid the 12 pesos. I'm sure that, because of the deviations, we had been lead back toward the toll road without knowing it. But this was the only time during my return trip that I had to use the toll road.

Bendire's Thrasher was the species of intention the next day.

But since I wanted to drive as far as possible toward Agua Prieta, it would have to be a road side observation.

I stopped a few places that looked suitable along the way but didn't find it.

After passing Caborca it was still early and a road on the map leading north from Altar further ahead looked interesting. It would connect with the highway close to Magdalena de Kino which was my planned destination for the day, and would only be a little longer.

Smaller roads often provide better birding opportunities, but this road didn't have much in that respect, not until I reached the village of Tubutama and the nearby reservoir.

I found a good lookout at the southwest end of the reservoir, at the foot of a simple wooden crucifix. Except from the Organ cacti the whole scenery looked very much like my Aguascalientes. I felt good about that, and thinking about it, I wonder if I'm already much more attached to this spot in the middle of Mexico that has now been my home for two years, than I'm realizing?

On the water some large white birds could only be **American White Pelicans**, but in another direction some other white birds were swimming around in the distance. But they were smaller. I mounted my telescope atop my mobile tripod and could quickly affirm my first sighting of **Snow Geese** in Mexico. A modest group of 6 birds.

At the distant north end close to the village I could see a good number of birds lying on the water. I wanted to go there but the road leading in that direction looked a bit to rough for my Attitude, so I tried from the village side later, but never found a access to the water.

When about to leave from the southern lookout, a few clumpy sparrows were running on the ground. They were hiding behind the bushes but finally I got a good view and was pleased with my third observation of **Lark Bunting** in Mexico. 5 birds. I tried to get a good photo but they always moved just in the right moment – for them, not for me. Later I would see many, but despite that the species should prove not to be particularly shy, I never got a really good picture. Caray!

While trying to get a picture of the Lark Buntings, a very small sparrow popped up and exposed itself enough time for me to capture it. I didn't give it much attention in the moment because I was chasing the buntings, but my instant thought was that it was a small Clay-colored Sparrow – common in Aguascalientes in winter.

So it was not until in the evening when reviewing the days catch, that I could see that it had been a new Mexico species for me: Brewer's Sparrow.

I was thrilled!

From the little information there is about the birds in Aguascalientes I knew that others had rated this species as common in winter. This had puzzled me because during all my time living there, I have never seen it. Clay-colored and Chipping Sparrows I see a lot during winter, so I had started to fear that it was me who was not competent enough to spot them between the others, since they can look very much alike in basic plumage according to the books.

But after seeing this bird and later on several more, I'm completely confident that it has not been the case.

Seen well a Brewer's Sparrow is rather distinct. Beside an overall grayer appearance, it is smaller and slimmer than the other two and more important, the tail looks very long, often held down, giving it a faint resemblance with a trogon!

It doesn't always have to be rare and extreme to have value...

2 Greater roadrunners, 10 Black-throated Sparrows and 2 Harris's Hawks added to the joy, as did the first Canyon Towhee in a long time.

I reached Magdalena de Kino while the sun was setting and though the town looked pleasant with a cosy atmosphere, I decided to drive on to Cananea.

Relying on the good fortune I entered the town and found the first hotel. It looked too fancy to be within my budget, which a quick request also confirmed. About 700 pesos a night. I found another on the other side of the street. "Sorry we're full. Try there...". I did, but "Sorry we're full". Hhmm. Not worried, but starting to think. "You can try this...". And so I did. "I have one room left". "I take it". And so it happened that I spend a good night in the broom closet at Hotel Loma Bonita. Could it be because Cananea is so close to the border that all beds were occupied?

I got up early the next day and continued toward Agua Prieta. The idea was to look for Baird's Sparrow along the way. But before getting there I added another new species to my Mexico list.



10 minutes east of Cananea I was driving through beautiful grassland when a big bird approached from the right in front of me. It continued as I did and crossed the road in the moment I was closest, and it was easy to see that it was an eagle, a **Bald Eagle**. I stopped as fast as I could, and reached to see the bird go down behind a hill, and as it turned I got to see the completely white tail, an adult. A group of Ravens flew up from where the eagle landed, as if they did not like the new company, perhaps forcing them away from a good meal.

The road was good for sparrows in general. But the place that Howell says is good for Baird's Sparrow wasn't when I was there, a flock of 65 Lark Buntings being the best.

So I missed the Baird's but got 6 of the Lilian subspecies of Eastern Meadowlark, a contrast rich type with a lot of white in the outer tail.

I passed Agua Prieta and at km 90 stopped to look for longspurs and pipits.

As I got out of the car a few **Chestnut-collared Longspurs** passed overhead. I had practiced the voice, and was glad to add a lifer to the list. After that there wasn't much to see, the grassland seemingly dead. But then a little flock flew up from the field some 300 meters away, and I decided to cross the fence to get closer. When I got there it turned out that behind a low dike a cattle pond still held water and it was used by the longspurs to drink. I went back to get my camera, which I had left behind because I thought it would just be a quick search and then back. But this was too tempting. I sat down close to the water hiding under my bag hide. It took a little while but then the birds started coming. But it soon proved to be hopeless! This species is just about the most impossible species I have ever tried to photograph. Extremely nervous they approached the water quickly, landed and took a sip and then took off again. All at once and all in less than a few seconds. Adding to this that they are very small, and in winter very gray, and me being a little too far from where they landed plus the fact that the dark gray mud made the birds fall in completely with the background resulted in zero good photos for my collection.

A few Horned Larks were around too, and that was about it. I tried to spot McCown's Longspurs between the others but couldn't find any. Acceptable with a new lifer, but still a bit disappointing.

I continued a few kilometers ahead and stopped at the truck stop at km 86. The oak grove on either side of the highway was supposed to be the only spot in Mexico where to find the Juniper Titmouse.

At first I just walked along the road but it didn't give any results. Then I returned to ask the men sitting in front of a primitive restaurant if it was possible to enter the property on the south side, and they assured me it was no problem. They didn't ask what I was doing, but maybe the camera was speaking for itself.

At the time of presence it was already in middle of the afternoon, and the birding was very poor, and after walking more than half an hour the only bird I found was a single **Ruby-crowned Kinglet**, ooooh, what disappointment!

You don't just pop by here, this place being so remote from everything in terms of Mexican birding. When would I have a chance to get back here?

I had to find it, but time was running. It was my intention to reach lake Janos today too, and I wasn't sure if it was possible to find a hotel in Janos or if I had to drive the extra 50 kilometers to the larger town Nuevas Casas Grandes south of there.

I started walking back to the car choosing a route closer to the creek running north-south. Still not a sound. Then I reached a small track leading down to the bottom of a creek. Why not I thought. The dense vegetation was very different from the oak habitat, and I had to try something different. And then I heard it! I had practiced this one too, and it sounded exactly like it. Oh what a joy, thank you so much I said out loud. Now I just have to see it.

There were more birds. Juncos and Chipping Sparrows and then the titmice. I could hear them all as I approached the flock foraging. They were constantly moving about and hiding in the foliage and finally I got it in sight: A **Bridled Titmouse**. Big boys don't cry, but I wanted to. 5 in all and though I tried desperately I couldn't find a single Titmouse. Howell mentions that both of them are around, and that was also why I wouldn't be satisfied with just hearing a new lifer. I had to see it. I know chickadees and titmice can sound very similar at times but that the Bridled Titmouse sounded exactly like the voice of the Oak Titmouse I have on my phone makes me wonder if someone made a mistake labeling, or perhaps the problem lies in the fact that different subspecies sound differently from one another.

Defeated, I returned to the car, and one of the men came to me, first of all to beg cigarettes. I told him what I had been doing, and it truly sounded like he knew the Titmouse, and he told me that over there, on the north side of the road, it was very common, and that I could get there looking for a yellow shrine along the road and from there take a side road leading down toward the plain and the oaks. The whole oak habitat is lying at the foot of a small mountain range.



I felt relieved, said thank you and speeded away. I started the ascend and looked intensely to spot the shrine, but nothing appeared. At a big pullout to the north I stopped after having ascended what seemed to be way too much. I could look down over the plain and see that the oak habitat was very extensive, but there was no way to get down there from up here.

Maybe I misunderstood him, or maybe he also was one of those Mexicans who feel it's better to give the impression of knowing than appear ignorant.

Today I'm sure that if you want to try the north side of the road you have to enter from the opposite side of the truck stop and find a road behind the cattle station located there.

So I gave up and continued. Still with a little hope that the shrine would show up though.

But it didn't. Instead I got to be grateful when a group of 15 **Montezuma Quails** wanted to cross the road as I approached them. They stopped and I stopped. The road was bordered by steep rocks and rather narrow. And being at a curve it was absolutely crazy when I started reversing and stopped the car in the middle of the road blocking both lanes, but I had to have my photo. The birds remained calm and walked unhurried across the road one by one, and from a bad angle I managed to get a few shots of reasonable quality.

When the birds had gone, I pulled over to turn the car, and in that moment 5 **Mexican Jays** decided to cross the road too, allowing me to add these two species as number one and two on my Chihuahua list taking effect after having just crossed the border between Sonora and Chihuahua.

There were no oaks on the eastern side of the mountain, and I continued driving none-stop to Janos, where I arrived at 4 pm. I decided to drive to the lake at once without trying to find a hotel because I wanted to get an idea whether it was worth spending time here or not. And at this moment night driving was something I just did without thinking too much about it, so if I had to drive the 50 kilometers to Nuevas Casas Grandes in the dark, no problem (not even being so close to Ciudad Juarez with all the drug-related violence. I mean you have to keep living, right?)

Janos

The lake is situated some 16 kilometers from the village which is very small, and located around just a single t-junction. One wouldn't expect to find any kind of accommodation in such a place, but as I had passed the last houses a big sign suddenly announced the Hotel Janos off to the right. I quickly decided that if they had a room available then I would stay here no matter what. And so they did. In fact, of the only 10 rooms the hotel had, most of them were.

The receptionist was a friendly middle-aged man but his appearance reminded me of someone you would expect to find behind the desk in a sleazy back-street hotel where nobody would care about anything except for your money.

So I prepared for the worst when I drove the 100 meters to the back of the property where the rooms were lying.

I wanted to drop off my suitcase but also to check out the place.

I opened the door and stepped inside.

It was perfect! Up-to-date and well equipped. Everything was working and clean. Another small miracle.

I love these contrasts. Order and civilization on one side of the wall and wilderness and untamed nature on the other side (more or less...).

In good mood I hurried off to find the lake before it got dark.

I reached it and found a pullout on the south side, from where I could get an overview. The distance from the road is some 500 meters, but it was still easy to see that thousands of Snow Geese and **Sandhill Cranes** were present. The Crane I had actually forgotten as species to search for so it was a very good surprise, and in numbers too. Not just a handful difficult to brag about.

It was too late to try to get closer, so I packed up, to head back closer to the village where I had passed open grassy fields and where I imagined it would be possible to find a Barn Owl foraging in the twilight.

But you already know it: My owling skills are yet to be improved, so I ended up just enjoying an incredible beautiful sunset. Perhaps the most beautiful I have ever seen in Mexico.

My ex-girlfriend used to say that the sunsets in Aguascalientes are some the most spectacular in the world, and I agree they can be exceptional, but this one was beyond what I had seen before. It was not like one of these extravagant sunsets filling the sky with strong orange and red colors. No, it was a very delicate pink color painted all over the sky, and as the bright moon high above threw its silver light over the landscape it all looked like a dream world, a fairy-tale. Standing there, in the cool quite evening I felt a deep happiness. Janos in my mind.

I returned to the lake the next morning as the first light hit the sky, but of course it was too late.

Even though I knew that the best way to get close enough to the cranes and geese without disturbing them would be to



get in place in cover of the dark, I didn't do it. Partly because I didn't know the area and wouldn't risk to do something foolish in the dark, and so I took the chance that I could still sneak up on the birds.

As I approached the lake a cacophony of cackling and trumpeting was filling the air. Most of the cranes were standing at the far shore while the geese were lying on the water close by.

Small flocks of each were already lifting, heading for their daily duties somewhere far or near.

The terrain around the lake is open and undulated with low desert vegetation, but close to the shore and the birds some taller bushes looked like a good spot, where I could hide.

I had to walk completely exposed, and though it was still dark, seen with human eyes, I made no illusions that the birds had not seen me. So I walked very slowly approaching them in the most perfect ninja style. But no luck. I was still some 300 from the shore when all the geese and cranes, thousands, took flight in one second. The sound was incredible and the sky filled with birds. I stood still instantly, just hoping, while they were circling high and low above the lake. But apparently they all decided to use the momentum now they were airborne, and they took off. After 15 minutes the lake was deserted and absolutely quite.

Now what, I thought. It was my plan to leave Janos in the afternoon starting the long drive south already today, but if I stuck to that plan now, I would not get any photos and I would not get a chance to find a Ross's Goose. The goose would not be a lifer, but it is one of these species that I find specially attractive. Maybe because of the circumstances looking for it. Mixed in between the thousands of Snow Geese, like small dots on a vast ocean doing a sea watch, and very similar to the thrilling experience it is back home in Denmark, sitting on the dyke in the Wadden Sea scanning thousands of Barnacle Geese and then feel that kick, that electric shock pulsing through you, when you spot a Red-breasted Goose among them. I wanted that experience.

So, like in Bahía San Quintín, I decided to stay another night.

I was pretty sure that the geese and cranes would not come back until the evening, so if I returned during the afternoon I could find a good spot for me and my bag hide before they would arrive.

Feeling more relaxed I started to check out what else was around.

An adult Peregrine of the tundrius subspecies came in to forage as did a Prairie Falcon. On the water 850 Mallards, 300 Northern Pintails, 10 American Wigeons, 50 Green-winged Teals, 15 Canvasbacks, 50 Ring-necked Ducks, 10 Lesser Scaups, 80 Eared Grebes and 15 Western Grebes were it. Nothing new. No hoped-for Common Mergansers, no Canada Geese (unless they had taken off with the snowies (which they didn't)) and in the air no Rough-legged Hawk either.

150 Chestnut-collared Longspurs were behaving as inconsiderate as they did at KM 86 earlier, and the few pipits around all were Americans making Sprague's Pipit a dipper on this trip.

Some of the cranes returned while I was still there, but they kept a distance.

I returned to Janos to pay for another night at the hotel and to get a real meal at the only restaurant in town. The last few days I had only been eating bread and dry pizza while traveling from west to east.

Before returning to the lake I drove south of Janos and found a dirt road leading west through farmland. I wanted to see if I could find some of the geese and cranes while foraging and also try for sparrows and longspurs. No geese nor cranes but 20 **Scaled Quails** gave me an unexpected lifer, while 350 Lark Buntings, 25 Brewer's Sparrows, 20 **Vesper Sparrows**, 2 **Pyrrhuloxias** and 7 Eastern Meadowlarks amongst others added to the numbers.

On ebird I had seen that big numbers of longspurs and pipits had been seen further southwest from here, but it was without the range limit, and at about 3 pm I returned to the lake to prepare myself.

I jumped the gate and started walking toward the small crest from where the lake would become visible. I reached it and what a frustrating disappointment: All the geese and cranes were already back! How could they do this to me? Surely any photo opportunity was gone now, and all I could hope for was to spot some Ross's Geese.

The cranes were resting at the far north corner as they did earlier and all the geese were spread out along the nearest shore like a waving white scarf. A positive angle to this was that I now got an opportunity to count the two species and ended with 4000 cranes and 11000 geese.

Photo or not, I still had to get closer to be able to spot the little goose, and as I repeated my approach strategy from the morning it was no surprise that both geese and cranes soon took flight. Again the cranes flew away but Miss Fortune finally smiled at me, and after circling a few times the geese landed in the middle of the lake. Minimum damage.

I now understood that they preferred to rest on or near the shore. The distance to the birds was too big for both photos or good views, so I had to wait until the birds would return to the shore by them selves. But this they would only do if the coast was clear, literally speaking. To hide between the tall bushes would be a good idea in terms of not being seen, but



the distance to the shore was too big to get good photos. I had to get closer. So I decided to take a chance and sat down in the open 10 meters from the water, put on my bag hide and started waiting. I waited and waited and waited...finally they started to move. Very slowly they started to swim toward the shore and me. It was windy that day and my hide was moving constantly. Of course they would be aware of it, the question was whether or not they would relate it to danger or just see it as an odd-looking bush that had grown up in a few seconds.

Apparently the latter, because the birds kept approaching. After more than an hour the first birds reached the shore about 2 hundred meters to my right and then slowly the rest was following. Closer and closer they got. It was obvious that they knew that something was not right about this new bush because instead of continuing in a consecutive line in front of me, they made a circle into the water, so that the next birds would not get ashore until some 20 meters to my left.

But eventually they did. They came ashore right in front of me and I was shooting away.

With 11000 birds in the flock of course it was only a fraction of them being so close, therefore I had to change between my camera and telescope to check out the distant ones. The movements while moving the monostick from one to the other probably would have been noticed by the birds had it not been for the constant movements of the fabric made by the wind. So they stayed calm and continued doing their things.

I could have saved me this operation though, because I didn't find anything other and snowies while using the scope. But I did get my Ross's Goose, because suddenly two or three small geese were paddling by on the water in front of me. I lack experience in terms of knowing whether the small form of Snow Goose can have the same size as a Ross, so I was not sure yet. From the photos they looked ok but the magnifications did not reveal enough detail. But then they suddenly changed direction and viola they paddled closer and embarked right in front of me. And these photos showed that they indeed were Rossies – sweet goodies!

In all I found 5 adults and 2 juveniles, all of the white morph. But the true number was probably much higher since these were just found between the birds closest to me.

Both large and small Snow Geese were present and in all some hundred of the blue morph.

After 2 hours sitting on the ground and with both photos and the little goose home safe, I felt it was time to move on, but I didn't want to disturb the birds in their tranquility. Impossible of course in the given situation. Luckily the problem solved itself without my intervention when suddenly they all took flight and filled the air with noisy panic. It had to be an Eagle causing this kind of furor. I couldn't see it though, but let it be and took advantage of the situation using the opportunity to pack up my gear as the geese once again landed in the middle of the lake.

With the luck and success I had just experienced I wanted to repeat it with the cranes too. They had still not returned from where ever they went earlier, so I had time to find the right spot to hide. As I started walking toward the north shore the geese closest to the distant shore started to cackle nervously and then took flight. I tried again and this time I spotted them: Two Bald Eagles on the distant shore. An adult and a juvenile it looked like. They never came close but a 200 % record increase of one species in one sighting is also worth something.

I found a good spot and sat down and started waiting again. After a long time with no activity they finally started to return. In small groups they arrived circling over the shore, but they did not land. Instead they chose a field several hundred meters inland and out of sight. I could still hear them. I was hoping that at least some of them would have enough courage to land in front of me, but perhaps their nature made them follow a safety instinct telling them that if other individuals were present they should stick to them because they would already have 'cleared' the area where they were: Even if the best spot was where I was sitting, they instinctively suppressed there foremost inclination to play it safe.

It was not until the sun was going down and the light too poor (same beautiful pink color as the day before though) that they finally dared to come to the shore. Slowly and only few of them, perhaps 50. I could see both lesser and greater, and they passed by me at about 20 meters distance heading for the water. I took some pictures while they stood there with the pink reflection from the sky as background, and it would have been the most perfect picture, had it not been for a too slow shutter speed. "I'm dreaming of a real tripod, uhh ahh uuuuh, just like the one I actually have..."

Not fully content of course, but still feeling good that it had been possible, with so little effort, to get close to these magnificent creatures.

I then decided to call it a day while only a few cranes would be affected, and walked back to my car smiling at the moon...



And then it was over. The trip. Well, almost. Though I was so far from home and would be passing many potentially great localities on my way back, I was only going to do one more stop. I had to get back to be able to return the car in time, but I wanted to see a Worthen's Sparrow first.

And why that you might ask, when there are several other species in the north being lifers and worth trying for?

The sparrows fascinate me in general. A big diverse group and a challenge to get to see them all and well. And though I can't say that I don't like the jungle with its colors and biodiversity in abundance, then I'm more attracted to the dry open land I think. And that's where the sparrows live. And Worthen's Sparrow being an endemic to Mexico threatened by extinction I wanted to see it before it will be too late. And with the very moderate speed that I have been adding new species to my Mexican list until now, who could say when I would get another chance to look for it.

And to do that, I had to go to Saltillo in Coahuila.

Of course Howell mentions where to find the sparrow, but the book is more than 15 years old, so I asked a local birder, Rene Valdez, from Monterrey if he had up-to-date information about it, and he told me that San Rafael southeast of Saltillo in the state of Nuevo León was a good place to look for it. Howell's place was actually part of the same locality complex just further to the west. Rolling grassland with scattered bushes is the habitat it prefers, but it is also a habitat that is being destroyed and converted into farmland, which is the main reason for its critical situation.

It is a long way from Janos to Saltillo, more than a thousand kilometers, so I had planned with a night somewhere in between to get there, when I took off the next morning.

Driving was the main activity this day, and all the birding would be from roadside observations.

To cut it short, I chose the free highway and the trip was rather uneventful in terms of scenery and birds.

But the beautiful autumn colors around Buenaventura was a highlight and from the only 13 species I saw this day, 250 Chestnut-collared Longspurs on the Buenaventura – Pan Am highway is worth mentioning as were 250 Sandhill Cranes crossing the highway as the sun went down.

I arrived at Torreón at 7:30 pm after a long drive of 920 kilometers. Absolutely content with this effort, I could now take it easy the next day approaching Saltillo.

I tried to find a hotel in my price range but ended up accepting the most expensive price during the whole trip with 850 pesos a night at the Best Western hotel.

Along the highway north of Torreón you find 3 good quality hotels, but they are all a bit expensive. I asked in two of them if it wasn't possible to find a cheaper accommodation, Torreón being a large city. In both places they told me that I could find some in the center of town, but it was not recommendable to go there because it was highly dangerous! What do you do then? It sounded more like if they were trying to frighten me to stay with them. But I was tired and was not in the mood to challenge this warning. They won. Almost. I chose the Best Western as being the last of the three where I hadn't asked about a cheaper hotel.

A decision to learn from: Best Western is the most overrated hotel I have stayed at till date in Mexico. A lot of Christmas adornments, but a boring breakfast buffet, indifferent staff, broken iron and an average room with no more facilities than my 350 pesos room in Janos the night before. Should have chosen the First hotel at the same price and where both the receptionist and the doorman had been smiling and friendly.

Tanque de Emergencia

From Torreón to Saltillo it is about 200 kilometers, and midway from there I chose to drive via Parras de La Fuente to reach the highway south of Saltillo. I wanted to go directly to Tanque de Emergencia a village that Howell mentions as a reliable locality for the Worthen's Sparrow.

On the map it looked like a very interesting road, and it was indeed. Especially if you're interested in potholes! Except from the washboard roads back in Baja California this was the absolutely most horrible road I had been driving EVER in Mexico. It took me way too long time to drive this stretch, and reaching the village General Cepeda I even took the wrong road and ended up on the Torreón-Saltillo highway instead of the one going south. 3 Roadrunners and a Pyrrhuloxia was the best I found, making it all a waste of time.

The most positive thing about it was that I would now have to drive through Saltillo and hopefully be able to spot a hotel, so that I knew where to go in the evening when returning in the dark. And so I did.

The bad thing was that I had wasted almost all the day when I finally reached Tanque de Emergencia. Even the village had been difficult to find from Howell's guiding (but if you continue south long enough on highway 54 you eventually



reach a big road sign, so you can't miss it).

But this was not the end of the difficulties this second last day of the trip. The road leading up the hills from the village was at the beginning not a real road, more like bare rock protruding from the underground. Later it becomes easier, but never comfortable. 4x4 is what you need. When I finally arrived at the broken water tank I had about half an hour to find the sparrows, before I had to go back. I didn't want to drive this last stretch in the dark getting stuck by loosing an oil filter or worse.

The rolling hills and the grassy fields were very beautiful in the late afternoon light. I stood still and listened to see if I could spot any life out there. There were only few bushes and the grass had been grassed almost to the roots, making it difficult for the sparrows to hide, which was positive. But there was no life. I love the silence, but not in this moment. I started walking across the nearest field toward the water tank. I had to do something. Suddenly the field started “squeeking “ and to my surprise all around me Prairiedogs were busy warning me to get the h... out of their territory. Under normal circumstances I would have respecting them, but I had to find the sparrow. Then in the distance a few pipits started flying around landing behind what looked like a dike. At least I had found life. Maybe I could find a Sprague's Pipit among them as a compensation for the big disappointment it was, not to be able to see any sparrows. In a bush below the dike a Loggerhead Shrike popped up as I approached, and then suddenly there was another bird next to it. Smaller. Wouw – could it be? I moved closer as I started taking photos to have insurance, if it decided to fly before I could see it well with the binos. Closer and closer and at last I was sure: My first **Worthen's Sparrow!** It took off before I got close enough to get a good photo, but more than grateful with this victory you'll hear no complaint from here. One bird in the notebook is better than zero, though I would have liked to see a big flock like Howell and ebirds say is possible. Maybe I would have found them if I had had time to continue further into the hills. A short moment I considered to stay there and sleep in the car, to be on spot in the morning. It was truly a beautiful evening and so quite. It would have been a great experience. But not very practical without the right equipment, and being the last night of the trip I also felt I deserved to sleep in a good bed and have a good meal to celebrate all the good experiences.

Content I returned to Saltillo and the City Junior hotel I had spotted on the way out. It was another night at 850 pesos but the bed was good and the restaurant next to the hotel too, so I was full of spirit the next morning when I took off to visit San Rafael and from there the long drive home.

San Rafael

I found San Rafael without problems. I didn't know exactly where I should look for the sparrows, but instinctively I decided to drive toward the west where the flat open field land looked most promising. I stopped several places in the beginning of the road without luck. Ploughed fields were not what I was looking for, so I continued until I found a grassy field with short grass. Scanning it from the road I could see that this was another Prairiedog territory. A big territory. Hundreds. And in between Burrowing Owls were living too. 7 in all I found. Long-billed Curlews were also using the field, foraging. In all along the road I counted 140. But no sparrows. Should I continue along the road or should I try to walk into the fields to try if I could flush some? In doubt, I continued driving a while passing more grassy fields. I then passed some small bushes close to the road, and suddenly a few sparrows popped up. They looked tiny and I thought to myself that they had to be Brewer's Sparrows. The Worthen from yesterday had looked rather big sitting in the bush, and these birds were not looking like it at all. Still I stopped to get a better look and surprise: They were Worthen's! 10 in all foraging on the ground behind the bushes. I returned to a spot where I could park and started walking toward the birds. I got closer and closer, but when I was about 20 meters from them they got aware of me, and started moving further ahead as I did too, keeping a distance of 20 meters all the time. What a shame. You can't get a good photo of a small sparrow from that distance. And the terrain was completely open with nowhere to hide or sneak up on the birds. Of course it was great to have found the birds, but being so close I really would like the last souvenir of the trip. What can you do? I had my phone with the voice of course, but I was almost certain that they would never respond to a playback while I was standing there completely exposed and even less would they approach me. But what the heck. Nothing to loose by trying, so I turned it on: The result was incredible. INSTANTLY, I mean when they heard the very first tones they came to me at lightening speed, and sat atop the bush closest to me. Hallelujah what a miracle. This was the best response to a playback I had ever experienced. They stayed for several minutes allowing me to get perfect pictures. I even had to back up a little because I was too close to the bush to focus well. A big thought to Rene Valdez and the great Miss Fortune. This was absolutely the most perfect finish I could ever dream of. I continued a little while along the road after that, to see if I could find something else, but I couldn't really concentrate. It had to be something really big now to beat the sparrows.



So I decided to return toward the highway and begin the long drive home. After a few hundred meters I passed a stretch with tall dry vegetation, perhaps it was a small patch of a leftover corn field. Anyway, it was very different from where I had seen the first sparrows, but here another group of about 10 Worthen's Sparrows was foraging. Just to mention this to give a picture of some different micro habitats where you should look for them.

And so at 1145 am I closed my notebook, took off my binoculars and turned right on to the highway heading for San Luis Potosi and Aguascalientes.

There was nothing eventful in terms of birds on the way back, and at 630 pm I could park my Attitude in front of the house and say thank you for an incredible journey. And especially thank you for a journey without any problems other than the little bump at the back of the car.

To see the complete list of my observations you should go to http://www.naturewatch.dk/header.php?file=obs_search. Here you enter the date interval: 2010-10-27 to 2010-11-23 and choose your preferred view mode.

And of course, if you have any questions you can reach me on naturewatch@naturewatch.dk

Enjoy life!