



Yucatán

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bird sightings by Jesper Bay Jacobsen, www.naturewatch.dk

Different from the normal vacation schedule here in Mexico, Aguascalientes has decided to have two weeks of public vacation in connection with the big San Marco Fair, La Feria de San Marcos, which is held every year from mid April to mid May.

Twice my girlfriend has decided that we should go one week to Cancún, and since the birding on the Yucatán peninsula is excellent, I didn't feel like complaining.

This report is based on the locations visited rather than on the two different itineraries. And since these two visits comprise all my Yucatán sightings, I've decided to skip the species list within this paper and ask you to go to the Observations page on this site to see all the species I have recorded during these trips.

The two trips gave a total of 196 species, and 14 out of 17 Yucatán/Cozumel endemics (marked with an *) only missing the Cozumel Emerald, Cozumel Thrasher and Yucatan Nightjar.

Playa del Carmen

At both visits we stayed in Playa del Carmen. The first year in a beach front hotel, Shangri-la, some 1000 meters north of the Cozumel pier, meaning within the highly packed hotel zone. The pictures from the brochure, of course, had lured my girlfriend into thinking that this was the unspoiled paradise still to be discovered. But not quite so, though in comparison with the hotels around it, it held a high standard with good vegetation and many palm trees. And I managed to get my first **Eurasian Collared-Dove** (*Streptopelia decaocto*) in Mexico at this hotel.

This year, 2009, we stayed at a large complex, Sandos Select Club, el Caracol, about a kilometer or two north of Playa del Carmen. It is one of these places where you get a wristband and then you're free to consume – amongst the other thousands who got the same idea. It is really like a small village with all you need to survive within the premise. And if you feel good with the buzzing ant-like atmosphere, it is probably an ok place to recharge your batteries.

I, of course, instantly headed towards the exit to start exploring. Because in contrary to the first hotel this one was built right in the middle of the dense jungle scrub, on the coast, and had real birding to offer. Along a short track just outside the hotel area, I managed to get all the 'important' orioles for example: **Black-cowled** (*Icterus prosthemelas*), **Yellow-backed** (*Icterus chrysater*), **Yellow-tailed** (*Icterus mesomelas*), **Altamira** (*Icterus gularis*), **Hooded** (*Icterus cucullatus*) and **Orange Oriole*** (*Icterus auratus*). Other goodies would be **Rufous-browed Pepper-shrike** (*Cyclarhis gujanensis yucatanensis*), **Yellow-billed Cacique** (*Amblycercus holosericeus*), **Pauraque** (*Nyctidromus albicollis*), **Green** (*Cyanocorax yncas*) and **Yucatan Jays*** (*Cyanocorax yucatanicus*), **Olive-throated Parakeet** (*Aratinga nana*), **White-fronted Parrot** (*Amazona albifrons*) and Yucatan Spider Monkeys (*Ateles geoffroyi yucatanensis*).

From this point of view, me getting good sights of these species, the place is worth staying at. But I'm not so sure if the birds themselves would agree with me on their part: Some 100 meters from this good track the machines had already cleared depressingly large areas of natural vegetation,



probably to prepare the land for new large tourist projects. And it is obvious that this is only happening because people, like me, choose to stay at these places. I'm not proud of this, and I have decided not use this type of hotel any more.

Alfredo Borrera Botanical garden

Close to Puerto Morelos south of Cancún you find this small garden with public access. It is neither big nor spectacular. Most plants are local, and if it wasn't for the constructed paths, it would be hard to distinguish it from any other part of the coastline vegetation. But lying close to Cancún and the airport it can work as a last or first stop on the trip. The birding can be as good as any other part of the northeast coast area. If you check the distribution maps in Howell and Webb's 'Identification guide to Mexico and northern Central America', -95, and other trip reports, you will get a better idea of the potential. Goes for all the localities of course.

I remember being a bit disappointed with what I saw. To me a botanical garden should be blooming, big and green. It is nothing like it. But my disappointment was also caused by a modest birding result. I had hoped for some of the endemics, like Yucatan Woodpecker, Orange Oriole and Rose-throated Tanager, but didn't get anything. Most interesting were Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, **Lesser Greenlet** (*Hylophilus decurtatus decurtatus*), Bananaquit, **Eastern Kingbird** (*Tyrannus tyrannus*), **Yellow-rumped** (*Dendroica coronata*) and **Blackburnian Warblers** (*Dendroica fusca*) and Yellow-backed Oriole. Some 25 species in total.

Take notice that the entrance being on the east side of the highway is not that easy to see. But it is signed so if you slow down when approaching you'll probably have no problems.

Cozumel Island

Cozumel Island I visited on both occasions, but only as one day excursions. This is of course way too short time to do the island justice. But if you go there only to get the endemics, one should think it would be enough. But not for me. Both times I got the **Cozumel Vireo*** (*Vireo bairdi*) but dipped on the Cozumel Emerald (*Chlorostilbon forficatus*), not to mention the Cozumel Thrasher (*Toxostoma guttatum*).

After a hurricane caused the population of the latter to crash in 1988, it has been virtually absent. In 2004 it was seen again, and since then there have only been a few undocumented claims. But it sounds unbelievable that just this one species should take so much affect from the hurricane impacts when the other species on the island have not had any problems to revitalize. Perhaps other factors play a part here. But no matter what, I insist on being optimistic that one day I will get to see it!

The Emerald on the other hand is a bigger mystery to me, how I could avoid it, since everybody else seems to get it without too much effort. But perhaps the time of year plays a factor here. Most people visit the island during the winter months, and I could suspect that when reaching the end of April the birds are breeding which often makes the birds more secretive in their behavior.

Both times I rented a VW, 35-40 USD a day, which is sufficient since the driving distances are limited and the terrain is flat.

The first year I only did the east-west road out of San Miguel, reaching the small waterholes at the eastern end near the coast, and in the afternoon a short visit to the north track leading to the sewage plant where the only interesting observation was of 2 **Bananaquits** (*Coereba flaveola caboti*), local



race.

Most time I spend along the access road towards the ruins San Gervasio and at the ruins themselves. A good site with several tracks into the dense scrub, giving me most of what I hoped for: 2 **White-crowned Pigeons** (*Patagioenas leucocephala*) and several **Caribbean Doves** (*Leptotila jamaicensis gaumeri*) along with **Vaux's Swift** (*Chaetura vauxi*) and **Yucatan Woodpecker*** (***Melanerpes pygmaus pygmaus***). **Tyrant Flycatchers were Caribbean Elaenia** (***Elaenia martinica***), **Yucatan*** (*Myiarchus yucatanensis lanyoni*), **Dusky-capped** (*Myiarchus tuberculifer platyrhynchus*) and **Brown-crested Flycatchers** (*Myiarchus tyrannulus*). And the main target Cozumel Vireo. 3 of these while its cousin **Yucatan Vireo*** (*Vireo magister*) was much more numerous. **The Cozumel House Wren** (*Troglodytes aedon beani*) showed up too, as did several **Black Catbirds*** (*Melanoptila glabrirostris*).

Being so late in the year the warblers on the contrary had left and I only got the local '**Golden' Yellow Warbler** (*Dendroica petechia rufivertex*), a **Black-throated Green Warbler** (*Dendroica virens*) and a **Northern Waterthrush** (*Seiurus noveboracensis*). Cozumel is the place to try to get some of the warblers that use an eastern migration route across the Caribbean Ocean and which winters here in small numbers like Cape May (*Dendroica tigrina*), Black-throated Blue (*Dendroica caerulescens*) or Prairie Warbler (*Dendroica discolor*).

Number of species seen was 28.

The second time I decided to do the round trip following the road southward out of San Miguel with a first stop at the abandoned housing project mentioned in Howell's 'Where to find birds in Mexico'. New species were **Green Breasted Mango** (*Anthracothorax prevostii*) and **Black and White Warbler** (*Mniotilta varia*) while Yucatan Woodpecker, Cozumel Vireo, Yucatan Vireo, Caribbean Elaenia and Black Catbird showed up again.

After this I decided to try the fields at Cedral where Howell says Smooth-billed Anis (*Crotophaga ani*) should be. I didn't see anything. Drove several kilometers along a nice wooded track but it was dead quite, probably because it was around noon.

So I gave up and headed for the park Punta Sur at the south-east corner of the island.

On the way I passed two **Scissor-tailed Flycatchers** (*Tyrannus forficatus*) sitting in a tree along the road. A welcomed sight.

At the park, again following Howell, I wanted to check out the beach where terns should be gathering. And they were. I got my **Brown Noddy** (*Anous stolidus stolidus*), one bird, and my **Roseate Tern** (*Sterna dougallii dougallii*), some 15. Both new for me in Mexico, and the Roseate a true lifer as well. **Least** (*Sternula antillarum*) and **Sandwich Terns** (*Thalasseus sandvicensis acufavidus*) were there in good numbers too.

The area is now run like a reserve, and you have to pay an entrance fee(50 pesos). You can drive to the lighthouse of Celerain, which offers a great view of the island and the ocean from atop. The road continues towards Punta Sur, but I'm not sure if is permitted to drive this stretch yourself. Between the tern point on the beach and the lighthouse you find a good observation tower overlooking a large wetland.

Unfortunately I was only allowed 15 minutes in the tower because they were about to close the reserve (rather early, I think at 5 pm). Earlier the same warden had scolded me for walking on the beach from the tern point to the road. Apparently some parts of the beach are protected because they



are used by sea-turtles, but I'm pretty sure I was walking outside the marked area. Observations from the tower must be best in the morning with the sun rising from the ocean behind you. I only got a **Reddish** (*Egretta rufescens rufescens*) and **Great Blue Heron** (*Ardea herodias herodias*) along with some Charadrius plovers, a **Northern Jacana** (*Jacana spinosa gymnostoma*) and an **Osprey** (*Pandion haliaetus carolinensis/ridgwayi*). But it should be possible to dig up a lot more; perhaps a Caribbean Coot (*Fulica caribaea*).

After this I continued north along the east coast, and though my girlfriend might have a point saying that the island is not very beautiful, I still love this part. You find a few houses and restaurants along the road but in major parts you find an isolated coastline. In parts rocky, and wild in others sandy and gentle with the waves rolling in from far away. And driving there with the salty wind in your face and the hot sun illuminating this incredible scenery, you just feel GOOD.

Reaching the north-east corner of the highway circuit, that's where the east-west highway out of San Miguel meets the coast, I stopped shortly at the small waterholes along the road. But it didn't give much. A flock of **Black-bellied Whistling-ducks** (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) pasted overhead. The first time I had a few **Blue-winged Teals** (*Anas discors*) and some Coots at this spot. Without being aware, at that time, of a potential Caribbean Coot, I just noted them as **American Coots** (*Fulica americana americana*) which were to be expected. Today I leave them at that, and don't think more of it.

After this I headed back to town to return the car before the office closed. And then with the ferry back to be able to benefit from my eat-all-you-can-wristband before the restaurants were closing.

Other good species that are possible to see on the island are Rose-throated (*Piranga roseogularis cozumelae*) and Western Spindalis (*Spindalis zena benedicti*). But perhaps difficult to get in April for same reason as with the Emerald.

Xcaret

Not a real birding locality, but maybe someone dear will force you to go there, so I'll give you my impression to know what to expect.

It is a big aquatic park: snorkeling, dolphins, subterranean swimming, boat trips and the like. And if you're into all this it is a pretty cool place. But the best part is their evening show. They have this huge tent-like construction where they perform a historical show starting with some of the traditional pre-Hispanic customs like the ball-play Pelota. It looks very realistic though the winners are not afterward rewarded by an honorable mortal sacrifice as is the tradition. Later you get to see some traditional Hispanic dancing with pretty women, big dresses and all that. All very nice. But be sure to bring some supplies on your own to the park, since their food and beverage prices are simply ridiculous.

And the birding? Well, I got my first **Turquoise-browed Motmots** (*Eumomota superciliosa superciliosa*) and Orange Orioles there, and had a nice **Cave Swallow** (*Petrochelidon fulva citata*) as well. Otherwise mostly common stuff.

Tulum



Famous Maya ruins overlooking the incredible beautiful Caribbean Ocean an hour south of Playa del Carmen.

Here you can mix your interests for swimming, archeology and bird watching if you like.

You probably don't want to go there just to bird watch, but being there for one of the other reasons, there is plenty of reason to bring your binoculars also.

From the entrance to the ruins you have to take a small train or walk a few hundred meters, and both this stretch and the ruin grounds can be good. **Mangrove Vireos** (*Vireo pallens semiflavus*), many Yucatan Jays, a very cooperative **Bare-throated Tiger-Heron** (*Tigrisoma mexicanum*) and my only **Gray Kingbird** (*Tyrannus dominicensis*) in Mexico yet as well as Yellow-backed Oriole to mention the most interesting. We stayed only a few hours to head towards Cobá, deep in the jungle...

Cobá

Half an hour west of Tulum in the middle of the jungle you find this fine ruin complex. You can climb the highest pyramid to get above the trees to enjoy a magnificent view of forest as long as the eye can reach, or try to spot some raptors.

I have only been there once and since we arrived in the afternoon the bird activity was not high in the forest. A **Wedge-tailed Sabrewing** (*Campylopterus curvipennis*) and a Green Jay turned out to be the best. I decided to leave the ruins to visit the lake just outside the entrance. Here the birding got better. Different swallows were dancing above the water: **Barn** (*Hirundo rustica*), **Bank** (*Riparia riparia*), **Mangrove** (*Tachycineta albilinea*), Cave and **Ridgways Northern Rough-winged Swallow** (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis ridgwayi*) and a single **Black Tern** (*Chlidonias niger surinamensis*). Along the road **Social Flycatcher** (*Myiozetetes similis texensis*), **Couch's Kingbird** (*Tyrannus couchii*), **Streaked Flycatcher** (*Myiodynastes maculatus insolens*) and **Yellow-winged Tanagers** (*Thraupis abbas*). **White-tipped Dove** (*Leptotila verreauxi fulviventris*) and **Ruddy Ground-dove** (*Columbina talpacoti rufipennis*) were there as well as a **Glossy Ibis** (*Plegadis falcinellus*) and when it started to get dark hundreds of **Great-tailed Grackles** (*Quiscalus mexicanus loweryi*) and **Bronzed Cowbirds** (*Molothrus aeneus aeneus*) took cover in the vegetation along the lake shore, and there, finally, came out a young **Spotted Rail** (*Pardirallus maculatus insolitus*), the one I hoped for.

As we started to drive back I therefore was very pleased and content with the situation. But we had not been driving long before this feeling of satisfaction was replaced by sadness, when I, in the dark, involuntarily hit a large flying bird with the windshield. It came out of the darkness in a split second directly towards the light of the car, and I had no chance to avoid the accident. Of course I felt bad about it, but there is really not much to do in a situation like that, other than accept that you just made a contribution to the mortality rate of the traffic statistics in Quintana Roo, Mexico. Starting to drive slow on the highway is of course out of the question so I continued and hoped it would not happen again. But a few minutes later another quick flash outside the windshield and then the loud sound from the impact when the bird hit. Then I started to feel really bad. Two birds in a few kilometers and we still had a very long way home. It would be a regular slaughter house, nothing less. But the conclusion was still the same: We could not drive slow on the highway, and we didn't want to stay out there in the middle of nothing all night, so we had to go on. I think I slowed down a bit, but it probably doesn't matter if you are a Poorwill and get hit by a car with 80 km/t



instead of 100 km/t. In both cases you're a goner.

But luckily it didn't happen again, and I was more than happy that only two birds were added to my absolutely dishonorable list of windshield species that night.

Both Yucatan Poorwill and Yucatan Nightjar live at Cobá and even though I wasn't able to id the birds, from the size it could very well have been one of these two species – or both.

San Felipe and Río Lagartos

The Flamingos, **American Flamingo** (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) being popular with my girlfriend as well, we decided to do an overnight trip to Río Lagartos to see them. Originally the plan had been to go to Celestún, but it was obviously a much longer drive, and I decided that we should try RL instead of.

We left Playa del Carmen at 830 arriving at RL 1140 doing a nonstop drive via Cobá. Perhaps it will be faster to take the Cancún-Valladolid autopista, but I thought the scenery and the birds while driving would be better doing the other route. Driving through the dense forest for a great part the scenery was nice, but the birding poor, with an occasional woodpecker or jay passing the road now and then.

I had done no planning whatsoever, so we entered RL just with the intention to find the water front and then play it from there. But it soon turned out that we didn't have to worry about anything, since right at the town border we were hailed by an old man on a bike. Flamingos? Normally a real nuisance with these eagerly insisting persons pretending being nice, only to get your money, but this time I thought it came in very handy. Being a 'family' trip the less hassle as possible would be better. So we followed him and agreed on a 700 pesos two hours boat trip to see the Flamingos and pass through some mangrove.

Normally birding in Mexico is not recommended during the hottest hours, and therefore I suggested to the boats men that we should wait until afternoon. But they said it was a bad idea, because later the tourists from Chichén Itzá would arrive and there would be a lot more traffic on the lagoon which tended to scare away the Flamingos.

So off we went at high noon.

Howell mentions that Kelp Gull (*Larus dominicanus*) and Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) could be seen on the mud flats on the way to the Flamingos, but I didn't see anything. I hardly recall any mud flats at all, so it probably was high tide. And if these gulls are just wintering, late April would be way past their departure time anyway, so it was just a naive hope to be able to add one of these to my Mexico list, I guess. But we were there to see the Flamingos first of all, the rest would just be bonuses.

And probably because it was noon the bonuses were modest: **Willetts** (*Tringa semipalmata semipalmata*), **Common Black-Hawk** (*Buteogallus anthracinus utilensis*), a nice **Boat-billed Heron** (*Cochlearius cochlearius phillipsi*), **Reddish Egrets** (*Egretta refescens rufescens*), **Laughing Gulls** (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) and **Royal Terns** (*Thalasseus maximus maximus*). No Tiger-heron nor Pygmy Kingfisher. But we got the Flamingos!

Passing the bridge towards the east, doing a few bends and there they were in all their colorful splendor. I estimated some two thousands spread out across the lagoon feeding on the micro-organisms that give them this intense red color. We slowed down and approached carefully some of



the birds standing close in deep enough water for the boat to continue floating. They were wary, but I managed to get some nice photos, before they retreated to shallow waters further away, where the boat couldn't follow.

The entire population is said to hold around 10000-12000 individuals spread out along the northern coast of the peninsula, Celestún and Ría Lagartos being the most important localities. Curiously we only saw one young bird among the two thousands, but they probably stay together at others and more protected areas of the Ría.

On the way back we stopped at the banks of the salt ponds at Las Colaradas to collect some 'beauty clay'. On the way out we had passed a boat full of ghost-like tourists all covered with white clay. The boat man told us that the clay was supposed to make you healthy, beautiful and he almost added rich as well, which of course did the trick with my girlfriend. Luckily for her she always travels light, making it no problem to squeeze in 5 kg of pure Yucatán magic.

After the trip we drifted a bit, trying to find a decent hotel, but Ría Lagartos doesn't have much to offer in this respect. We reached the town border without finding anything, and a decision would have to be made, whether we should go back the same day or give it an extra try. My girlfriend more than satisfied with having seen the Flamingos wouldn't mind driving back, but having in mind all the other good stuff to be seen in this area, I couldn't accept it just like that, and luckily the car seemed to feel the same, and it started driving towards San Felipe. Here we were not received by anybody, so we ended at the waterfront on our own. Made a decision on a left turn, continued a bit, and there right in front of us, a decent hotel: Hotel San Felipe de Jesús. 5-600 pesos for the honeymoon suite(!), rather basic but decent and clean, and with the best of views towards the sea and the great open sky.

In the afternoon I went exploring the area on foot and was pleased to find a boardwalk entering the mangrove some hundred meters further down the road where the waterfront ended. At the beginning it was quite, but then suddenly I heard a call like a Eurasian Kingfisher, just softer, and there it was: the **American Pygmy Kingfisher** (*Chloroceryle aenea stictopectera*). A lifer. It perched two meters from me, a female. Unfortunately the photo opportunity was bad, so you won't see any of this little beauty.

The rest of the boardwalk, which is only about a hundred meters long and almost ends in someones scrap backyard, gave few other birds like Northern Waterthrush, **Spotted Sandpiper** (*Actitis macularia*), **American Redstart** (*Setophaga ruticilla*) and **Magnolia Warbler** (*Dendroica magnolia*). And then another goodie while seated on a bench midway down the boardwalk: **Rufous-necked Wood-rail** (*Aramides axillaris*). Silently it came out from the vegetation to walk along the waters edge. Unfortunately, again, it came out behind me and before I could fumble my camera ready to shoot, it was gone. But another good lifer.

The next morning I tried the road between San Felipe and Ría Lagartos to see if I could find the two endemics **Yucatan Wren*** (*Campylorhynchus yucatanicus*) and **Black-throated Bobwhite*** (*Colinus nigrogularis persicus/caboti*), and it turned out to be no problem. One flock of 6 Bobwhites and in all this morning 10 Wrens; more than enough. It was a nice morning with Olive-throated Parakeets and White-fronted Parrots flying around as well as several **Lesser Nighthawks** (*Chordeiles acutipennis micromeris*), and the **Northern Cardinals** (*Cardinalis cardinalis yucatanicus*) were singing while one of two **Ferruginous Pygmy-owl** (*Glaucidium brasilianum*



saturatum/ridgewayi) enjoyed a fresh-caught lizard. In a distant tree a dark medium-large bird was sitting, but it was not until I boosted the brightness on the computer that I realized it was a **Crane Hawk** (*Geranospiza caerulescens*). Another lifer. At the junction leading to Río Lagartos the Turquoise-browed Motmots showed up in company with a **Squirrel Cuckoo** (*Piaya cayana termophila*), and in the background a **Black-headed Trogon** (*Trogon melanocephalus melanocephalus*) was calling. In the tall grass in the ditch a **Gray-crowned Yellowthroat** (*Geothlypis poliocephala palpebralis*) refused to pose well for the photographer, but the **Blue-black Grassquit** (*Volatinia jacarina splendens*) did. And all Gnatcatchers heard and seen were **Blue-gray** (*Polioptila caerulea*). No sign of White-lored (*Polioptila albiloris albiventris*).

And then it was really time to get back to the hotel and my girlfriend, but I couldn't! Knowing that some kilometers further ahead the salt ponds were waiting, with their red water and potentially large amounts of shorebirds, it was just too tempting. I convinced myself that it would not be so much later, and after all she had money to buy breakfast in the restaurant, so she wouldn't be starving. With something looking like peace in mind I went off, and entered Las Coloradas some 10 minutes later. But before checking the salt ponds I just wanted to see if any gulls would be present at the pier as Howell mentions. But it turned out that it had been destroyed years back by a storm and only a few pillars were left. A few **Herring Gulls** (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) were present though, resting on the beach but nothing else. Except for a nice pair of **Zenaida Doves** (*Zenaida aurita salvadorii*) in company with a **Common Ground-dove** (*Columbina passerina pallescens*) walking in the sand. The Zenaida Dove another lifer. Really nice. And I was still not that late...

Then I went for the salt ponds with a little voice praying that they would be empty so that I could just go back right away. But nothing like it. Shorebirds in good numbers were scatter throughout the ponds. I had to accept that it would be impossible to check all of them within reasonable time, and I left the most distant flocks undetermined, some 1000 in all. The flocks that I did examine were feeding close to a drivable dyke and I was able to get close views and some photos. Present in the ponds were also few Flamingos, so if you're a hardcore ticker going for this species only, you don't have to spend time and money on the boat trip.

The shorebirds examined turned out to be **Dunlins** (*Calidris alpina hodsonia*), **White-rumped** (*Calidris fuscicollis*), **Stilt** (*Calidris himantopus*), **Least** (*Calidris minutilla*) and **Western Sandpipers** (*Calidris mauri*), **Sanderlings** (*Calidris alba*), **Ruddy Turnstones** (*Arenaria interpres morinella*) and **Lesser Yellowlegs** (*Tringa flavipes*). And then perhaps, most likely, kind of sure about it, **Semipalmated Sandpiper** (*Calidris pusilla*). I still lack sufficient field experience to be able to distinguish between some Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers on the fly. When I see a small darkish stint with a short bill which is not a Least, my instant reaction often is to say it is a Semipalmated. But when doing a more detailed examination my conclusion often ends with a Western. I have a photo of a suspected Semipalmated that I took, but I need to investigate a bit further before saying anything. Perhaps it will end up as a mystery photo for the rest of you to give it a shot.

Though the clock ticking away, I decided to keep staying at the ponds to have my standard field breakfast: A can of tuna mixed with vegetables, white bread, a banana and a Jumex mini juice (Strawberry and Banana is recommendable). But ending up the tuna with a piece of bread I cut my thumb badly on the nasty edge of the can, which of course was the higher justice letting me know



that I had now used all my credit, and it would now be time to go back. But now. I accepted, wrapped a piece of paper around my finger and left. And then it was, in that moment, that I just realized that back in the hotel in Playa del Carmen my girlfriend had asked me if she should bring any money, and I told her no because it was my treat...

Let's just say I survived, and the restaurant was kind enough to let her have breakfast without paying until I got back.

We took off to return to Playa del Carmen with the intention to stop to visit Chichén Itzá on the way. No birding of course for the rest of this day.

But first my girlfriend wanted to see if we could buy some face masks in the pharmacies in Río Lagartos. The swine flu had just broken out and the government recommended the use of face masks to avoid infection, but back in Aguascalientes they were already in short demand, so better bring some if possible.

So we went to RL where we managed to buy the last ones in one pharmacy, and while trying to find the other recommended pharmacy we passed close by the waterfront and my girlfriend wanted to stop to take pictures and watch the beautiful water. And then when we were about to enter the car again to leave, some Mexicans came out of the restaurant on the corner: Hello amigo, are you a birdwatcher? Bueno, espero que sí.

They were bird guides and the restaurant Isla Contoy their base. At first they wanted me to check a photo one of them, Ismael Navarro, had taken of an odd-looking Gull. He had been in doubt about it, and therefore sent a copy to some American birder and received the answer that it was a Herrmann's Gull (*Larus heermanni*) (quite a rarity it would be), but he was still not convinced and wanted me to give it a look too. He thought it was a Laughing Gull with a discolored plumage, and I could only agree.

Then of course we started talking about the birding, and I told them what I had already seen. Almost all the goodies but I would have liked to see the **Mexican Sheartail** (*Doricha eliza*) too, though not a lifer. Easy, they said. They are right here outside the restaurant. And in few minutes a nice female showed up to visit the bushes in front of the entrance. Easy indeed. And at the street corner on a lamp post, a fine little nest too. All very well, but then not to have them going to think too much about a guiding opportunity, I added that we were about to leave to visit Chichén Itzá.

But you can't they said, It is closed because of the swine flu. I told my girlfriend and just to be sure, she made a call to the site and they confirmed.

And the guides said they felt rather depressed at the moment because most of their clients had canceled their tours leaving them with nothing to do. In fact they wouldn't mind doing a tour with me for free right now just to do something. Pewww, what an offer! But of course that was not even close to be my decision to make, taking the morning's stunt into consideration. I told my girlfriend what they had offered, but made it absolutely clear that it would all be her decision. Yes, I would like to give the **King Vulture** (*Sarcoramphus papa*) close by a try, but if she said no, I would have nothing to say against it. Incredible, she said yes!

Then off we took with two of the guides to see if we could find the Vulture. It happened to be a locality called Rancho San Salvador on the way to Las Coloradas, and I had passed it in the morning. It is a dirt track going on for some kilometers through dry thorn scrub, and should be



excellent in the morning. Except from all the other species I have mentioned from the morning trip, another good species to see here is Lesser Roadrunner, though not that easily.

But it was early afternoon and what we got to see was moderate. A few Cardinals and the common parrots, a **Zone-tailed** (*Buteo albonotatus*) and a **Short-tailed Hawk** (*Buteo brachyurus fuliginosus*) and a **Cinnamon Hummingbird** (*Amazilia rutila corallirostris*). And then it suddenly was there. The Vulture. At first circling in the distance but finally it decided to glide. And right towards us. It passed right above our heads and landed in a tree a few hundred meters away. What a joy!

On the way back we stopped at a heron colony, **Snowy** (*Egretta thula brewsteri*), **Great Egrets** (*Ardea alba egretta*) and **White Ibises** (*Eudocimus albus*) for most part, and a few tour species like **Common Moorhen** (*Gallinula chloropus cachinnans*), **Solitary Sandpiper** (*Tringa solitaria cinnamomea/solitaia*) and **Mangrove Swallow** (*Tachycineta albilinea*). It is located inside the town east of the main street but not that close to the waterfront. You probably have to ask to find it.

And a final stop was at the eastern most part of the waterfront where **Black Skimmers** (*Rynchops niger niger*) and gulls come in to roost.

We then returned to the restaurant, had a shrimp cocktail, said our goodbyes and off we went.

These guides also do the boat trip. They said they would have done it for 500 pesos.

And since they seemed to know their birds, I think I will recommend them instead of the other company.

Isla Contoy guides: www.riolagartos-ecotours.com

Other guides: www.riolagartosexpeditions.com

Hotel San Felipe de Jesús: hotelsf@hotmail.com

We returned to Playa del Carmen via Cobá, and while driving the same highway at Cobá at night as we did the first time, we fortunately had no collisions this time!

Vigía Chico road

The final birding destination also happens to be the best.

Two hours from Playa del Carmen towards the south you find the town of Felipe Carillo Puerto. From here the road to Vigía Chico (inside the reserve of Sian Kaan) runs through the most excellent deciduous forest. Almost 30 kilometers you can drive along this road until you reach the gates of the reserve. Though it is physically possible to open the gate and continue along the road, it is not allowed. But you wouldn't need to drive that far at all. In fact, the best birding you will find within the first 5-10 km. From the road itself you will find several tracks heading off into the forest. Some of them going on for kilometers, others ending shortly at small lakes.

I arrived at 720, May 1 2009, and stayed in the area all day until 1945. Which of course, like it was the case with Cozumel, is way too short time to do the place justice. It deserves more days and especially it is recommendable to visit at night as well, since it should be one of the best places to find both Yucatan Poorwill and Yucatan Nightjar.

But I took what I could get and was not disappointed. 90 species was the result. To date the best result for a single locality for me in Mexico.



It started off nice with some beautiful **Red-legged Honeycreepers** (*Cyanerpes cyaneus carneipes*) and **Yellow-green Vireos** (*Vireo flavoviridis*) in the garden of the last house leaving town. And from somewhere in the scrub behind the house I actually heard a **Yucatan Poorwill*** (*Nyctiphrynus yucatanicus*). Several times and loud. Very promising.

I moved on to the real forest and chose a track to walk. Any one could be better. **Yellow-lored [Yucatan] Parrots*** (*Amazona xantholora*) were very noisy and a **Bat Falcon** (*Falco rufigularis petoensis*) stayed put for me to get a good shot at it, and there behind some very active beehives an **Olive Sparrow** (*Arremonops rufivirgatus verticalis/rhyphthorax*) was singing. But otherwise a bit quite.

I chose another path: **Gray-throated Chat** (*Granatellus sallaei boucardi*), **Ruddy** (*Dendrocincla homochroa homochroa*) and **Tawny-winged Woodcreepers** (*Dendrocincla anabatina typhla*), **Black-crowned Tityra** (*Tityra inquisitor fraserii*) and **Rose-throated Tanagers*** (*Piranga roseogularis tinca*). All lifers and I liked it! Squirrel Cuckoo, **Clay-colored Thrush** (*Turdus grayi tamaulipensis*), **Spot-breasted** (*Thryothorus maculipectus canobrunneus*) and Carolina [White-browed] Wrens (*Thryothorus ludovicianus albinucha*) were there too.

Along the road a **Blue Bunting** (*Cyanocompsa parellina parellina*) feeding and a bit further ahead two **Green-backed Sparrows*** (*Arremonops chloronotus chloronotus*) too.

Every time a bird flew up in front of me, I hoped it was a Singing Quail (*Dactylortyx thoracicus*), but it always turned out to be Caribbean Doves.

Moving on through the day the birds kept coming: The four hummingbirds Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, **Canivet's** (*Chlorostilbon canivetii canivetii*) and **White-bellied Emeralds** (*Amazilia candida candida*) and **Buff-bellied Hummingbird** (*Amazilia yucatanensis yucatanensis*), Yucatan, **Brown** (*Cyanocorax morio vociferus*) and Green Jays, 11 species of Tyrant Flycatchers among these **Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet** (*Camptostoma imberbe*), **Yellow-olive Flycatcher** (*Tolmomyias sulphurescens cinereiceps*), **Tropical Pewee** (*Contopus cinereus brachytarsus*), **Yucatan*** (*Myiarchus yucatanensis navai*), **Sulphur-bellied** (*Myiodynastes luteiventris*) and **Piratic Flycatchers** (*Legatus leucophaeus variegatus*).

The Wood Warblers were scarce, but 2 **Veerys** (*Catharus fuscescens*) and a **Scarlet Tanager** (*Piranga olivacea*) were good lifers. Six species of Orioles, Black-Cowled, Hooded, Yellow-backed, Yellow-tailed, Altamira and Orange were there, along with **Red-billed Pigeons** (*Patagioenas flavirostris flavirostris*), Ruddy Ground-doves and White-tipped Doves.

Worth mentioning are also good numbers of **Yucatan** (*Melanerpes pygmaeus rubricomus*) and **Golden-fronted Woodpeckers** (*Melanerpes aurifrons dubius*) and a single **Smoky-brown Woodpecker** (*Veniliornis fumigatus oleagineus*). **Olivaceous** (*Sittasomus griseicapillus gracileus*) and **Ivory-billed Woodcreepers** (*Xiphorhynchus flavigaster yucatanensis*) shouldn't be forgotten either.

Not much time was spent scanning the sky since it was mostly hidden behind the canopies, but I managed to get my second King Vulture for the trip. Of course one gets blasé quickly, and I would rather have changed it for an Ornate Hawk-Eagle (*Spizaetus ornatus vicarius*). But this was not heard of.



In the afternoon it got hot, and I decided to do a longer ride to be able to cool off by the air-condition. So I went all the way to the Sian Kaan gate. I did stop a few times though. For example when a **Gray-necked Wood-Rail** (*Aramides cajanea albiventris*) passed the road heading for a small lake nearby. Nice to see it in a habitat where its name becomes relevant.

Of course I didn't see much on the last half of the road towards the gate, while driving, but it occurred to me that the vegetation got more dense the further I went, and at the same time tracks off the road got scarcer too, making it more difficult to actually get to see the birds in this area.

I finally reached the gate and got a little surprised to see that it would be possible to continue if I wanted. The road was blocked by a post, but it could be opened without problems. I had expected the reserve to be firmly fenced off as it is so often used here in Mexico. But no. The only fenced off area was that of the biological station lying to the left side of the road. A few information posters gave an overview of the area, and then the gate to the station opened, and out came one of the staff, accompanied by a guy that earlier had passed me on a motorbike asking if he could do it all the way through the reserve to Tulum. I thought it was a rather strange question since the reserve is absolutely off the beaten track and contains no connecting roads. Meeting these two together I thought it was even more strange, but of course none of my business. We talked a little and finally the warden said that if I wanted to enter the reserve I could do it. No problem. Well, of course I would like too but it was about to get late if I also had to get back to the start of the road to try for some nightjars. But the two took off on a cuatro-bike, and then, really tempted, I decided that a little walk wouldn't be a problem. I could always drive a little faster. It was a good dirt road.

I started walking, but as I had noticed earlier the vegetation was really dense and it was impossible to get to see anything. But then some 400 meters ahead I guess, I saw two large birds walking on the road. I could not see them well enough in the binoculars to determine if they were Great Curassows (*Crax rubra rubra*) or Ocellated Turkeys (*Meleagris ocellata*). Both should be here according to Howell. But very thrilled I continued to get closer. While walking, first one little dove came flying low along the road towards me. The light was not so good and it flew rather fast. It pasted me before I could get a good look at it, but it occurred to me as a ruddy colored dove, thus probably a Ruddy Quail-dove (*Geotrygon montana montana*). Another came shortly after in the same manner and looking the same. I still haven't got experience with Quail-doves, but the Ruddy Ground-dove I know and the behavior of these two birds seemed to be somewhat different. My guts vote for the Quail-dove, but I'll let them count as unidentified, until I have gained more experience. The biggies on the road were still there, so I kept walking, until finally being able to tick two **Ocellated Turkeys***. New for me in Mexico. But not a lifer.

20 years ago I went to Mexico and also did a short trip to Guatemala visiting Tikal, and there they were walking around like peacocks between the ruins. 20 years ago I had also just started to become interested in bird watching. But when I was about to pack my rucksack, I remember that I decided not to bring both binoculars and a camera. Probably because of the space limit. The camera won having the consequence that years after I wasn't able to remember any birds I had seen in Mexico whatsoever. I took a photo of a Turkey in Tikal, and one of a California Gull in Los Angeles and that was all the evidence I had about birds from that trip.

As the bird watching got more and more serious the years to come, I started to regret the decision I took back then. All those good species I could have added to my list. But it did bring with it one good thing, and that was a decision to make it up again, one day. And that day is luckily now



present every day.

After the ticking of the Turkeys I decided to go back. I had entered the reserve with about a kilometer, and the clock kept ticking. On the way back a Yellow-lored Parrot posed well for me along the road, and then these melancholic drawn out calls started on both sides of the road. At first I couldn't place them, but then I remembered that the Tinamous had this type of 'sad song'. Later I could confirm that they had been **Thicket Tinamous** (*Crypturellus cinnamomeus goldmani*). The last lifer for the trip. Because the night listening when I was back at the start of the road gave only another Tinamou and a Lesser Nighthawk passing over. No Nightjars.

But I was more than pleased with the result, and as you know, it is always nice to have something to come, when visiting the next time.

Last action in Felipe Carillo Puerto was to buy a really cold Coca Cola, and a Fanta I think, some chips and then I was off into the dark and the end of the trip.