

**BIRDING
SAN BLAS
WESTERN
MEXICO**



**269 BIRD SPECIES
OBSERVED**



**31 MEXICAN ENDEMIC
BIRDS SEEN**



**10 HAPPY GUESTS
3 BIRD GUIDES**

TRAVEL JOURNAL



SAN BLAS: A HIDDEN MEXICAN TREASURE

Over 300 tropical bird species call the San Blas area home, and in the winter months the area's resident bird population swells with neotropical migrants from the U.S. and Canada. We based ourselves for the majority of our 8 nights at a single hotel in town, the elegant Hotel Garza Canela. One night was spent at the La Noria Ranch in the cool highlands of Cerro de San Juan, where the pine-oak forests harbor a number of unique species that can't be found elsewhere in San Blas. We explored a range of prolific habitats from mangroves, freshwater marshes, beaches, coastal lagoons, pine-oak montane forests, humid rain forest, shaded coffee plantations, and thorn scrub thickets. This low-key eco-tourism paradise lies far away from highly trafficked tourist destinations, and is truly an enjoyable birding destination.

WRITTEN BY BIRDING BY BUS TOUR GUEST: SUSAN HOWE



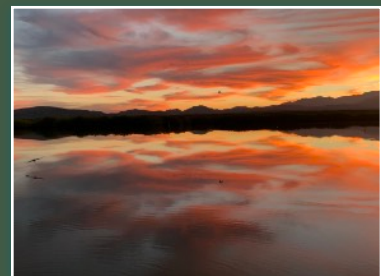
DAY 1 | ARRIVAL IN SAN BLAS

Finally time to get off that plane in Puerto Vallarta and look for Eliana smiling at me through the mask! I've been looking forward to these Mexican birds for what seems like well over a year. This trip will concentrate on the area in and around San Blas, Nayarit, along Western Mexico's Pacific coast. Ten participants will be joined by 3 guides (Marc and Eliana Kramer with local guide Mark Stackhouse) and a driver for our 9 days of birding. The group includes both experienced birders and novices from all over the United States.

After collecting up the rest of the group (and a margarita or two in the airport lounge) we are ready to meet our local guide and driver and roll out toward San Blas with a stop for lunch and some en-route birding. Erin and I hung back a bit from the group before lunch and were rewarded with a decent look at a pair of Sinaloa Wrens! We also had our first looks at the endemic Orange-breasted Buntings and Mexican Parrotlets.

Arriving in San Blas after a long travel day, it was a delight to check into the lovely Hotel Garza Canela. Sometimes birding accommodations are basic to say the least, but the Garza Canela is wonderful, boasting air conditioning and a pool. We'll be really comfortable here for the week. Our evening

meal is delicious, and the first of many gourmet meals we'll eat in this dining room over the course of the week. By day two, Eliana has ordered guacamole at every meal for us – including breakfast! Yum, avocado toast. Plenty of vegetarian and vegan options on the menu as well.



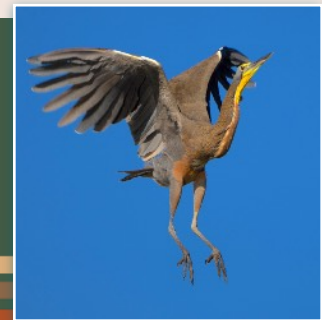


DAY 2 | ZOQUIPAN LAGOON & SAN BLAS RUINS

Our first full day of birding starts off with the amazing spectacle of a few Rufous-bellied Chachalacas parading right through the courtyard of the hotel. It really doesn't get any easier than this. I'm happy to have gotten these photos off the bat, because it's the closest we get to these birds over the course of the trip, although we see them numerous times. Mark Stackhouse, our local guide, is an American expat who has lived and guided in San Blas for more than two decades. He's got a full week of local specialties planned for us.



First this morning is a boat ride to the Zoquipan Lagoon very near San Blas. After boarding the small boats, we wind through the shady mangroves, stopping for views of the Mangrove subspecies of Yellow Warbler, some nice views of both Common and Great Black Hawks, and an especially close view of a perched Snail Kite, all from the comfort of our boats. Bare-throated Tiger-Herons made deep squawks from the trees as we made our way up river. As we round the last bend out of the mangroves into the lagoon, an amazing spectacle greets us. This is a Wood Stork and Roseate Spoonbill rookery, and we are going to get a really close look at these birds. Flocks of thousands of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks fly over as our boats approach the rookery. After a hundred photos at the rookery and glimpses of White-throated Flycatchers, Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, and many other birds also present in the lagoon, we head out to return to the hotel for lunch and a short siesta. This afternoon, we spend some time birding along the inlet beach, seeing many terns, gulls, boobies and shorebirds. Marc Kramer sets the scope for us so we can get a close look at the birds across the inlet. Mark tells us the story of the "jejenes" (which from what I can tell are the same small bitey midges we have in Florida) and how they kept San Blas from becoming a beach resort ala Puerto Vallarta. While the bugs may annoy, they don't bother me any more than the ones at home in Florida, and where there is a healthy bug population, birds are sure to follow!





DAY 3 | SINGAYTA & MILITARY MACAW FLIGHT

The next morning after our usual early breakfast at the hotel, we start by spending some time birding the Mirador de los Aves mudflats outside town. The water has receded quite a bit, but enough remains to host small flocks of shorebirds, waterfowl, large accumulations of herons and egrets, and a few flycatchers. My first lifer this morning is Stilt Sandpiper. An American Crocodile is waiting for its morning warmup right off the blind in the shallow water, giving me a good look for comparison with the alligators I see all the time at home in Florida. We continue on our morning, birding the roads around the town of Singayta, racking up lifers along the way. Highlights included Flammulated Flycatcher, Yellow-winged Cacique, Citreoline Trogon, and picking apart similar-looking Myiarchus flycatchers such as Nutting's, Ash-throated, and Brown-crested. Heading back to the hotel for lunch, I'm a little late to the dining room, because a Golden-cheeked Woodpecker is working the courtyard tree RIGHT OUTSIDE MY ROOM! Many photos later, lunch awaits. This afternoon, I'm going to see something I have never seen before, as we hop out of the van at a high overlook by the side of the highway. Sure enough, within minutes we hear distant screeching and see the brilliant technicolor plumage of a small group of Military Macaws

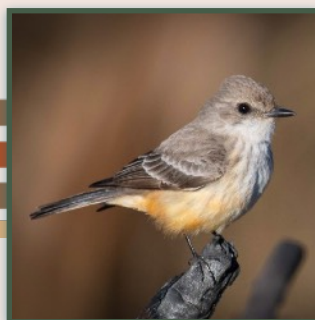
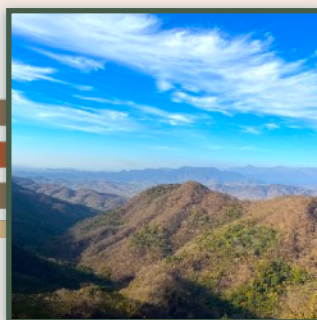
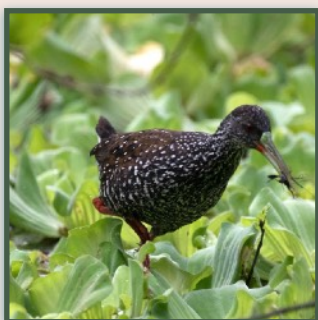
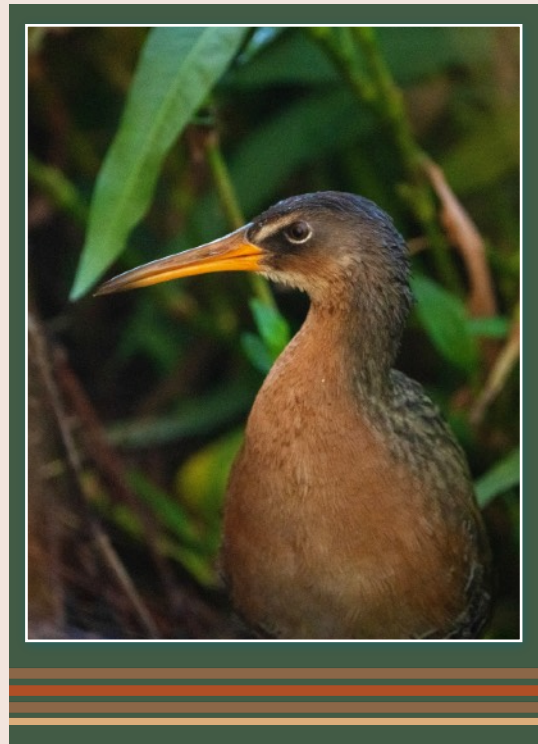


flying by on the way to their night roost, and we are watching them first at eye level and then from above! Even at a distance, it's an amazing sight. But the day is not yet done. On our way back to the hotel, we pull off onto a side road and all pile out just in time to witness a small group of Black-throated Magpie-Jays. Show-stopping birds with beautiful crested heads, streamers of tails, beautiful purple-blue backs in the sunlight posing for photos – the perfect end to the birding day. We conclude our afternoon with a lovely trip to the historical ruins of old San Blas and sunset over the modern town from the high overlook.



DAY 4 | TEPIC & HIGHLANDS OF CERRO DE SAN JUAN

Today we are all packing overnight bags as we will be headed up to the Cerro de San Juan above San Blas to spend the night at La Noria Ranch. From sweaty to frosty! Mark has a surprise for us on the journey up. We stop at a Tepic city park and walk through a small field to the edge of a marsh. As we line up, Mark calls an Aztec Rail, another Mexican endemic bird, which literally pops out at our feet! The bird is so close I kind of wish I had grabbed my iPhone instead of my zoom lens. It seems completely unconcerned with the dozen people oohing and aahing as it searches for the competitor it heard a minute ago. After a round of hugs about how amazing it was to be that close to a usually extremely secretive bird, we pile back in to continue the journey. Stopping to bird more roadside stops along the way, we rack up lifer after lifer, with Eliana keeping watch to make sure we don't accidentally wander into the sparse traffic. We get many waves and some puzzled looks from the passersby, but it's all good. Checking in to La Noria, we drop our bags in our casitas and have lunch in the open air cocina. This afternoon, we'll do some birding around the ranch, getting back in time for a delicious hot dinner and layering on more clothes for our night birding. Even though I'm not the hardcore lister, the bird we are seeking in the inky darkness of the mountain above La Noria is special. After a chilly but exhilarating motorized crawl in 4x4s, we quietly file down a path in the dark and line up. After just a few calls, we hear an answer! We are about to become part of only a handful of people to see the enigmatic Cinereous Owl, a new species split from the Barred Owl just this past year. High fives and the return trip down the mountain ends in celebratory shots for some, but bedtime for me. More birds await early tomorrow morning!





DAY 5 | HIGHLANDS OF CERRO DE SAN JUAN & CAMINO EL PANTANAL

The early morning sunlight at La Noria presents us with a small group of Spotted Wrens singing and posing for photos. Phenomenal! Lots of Black-headed Siskins, Lesser Goldfinches, Acorn Woodpeckers, with some orioles, warblers and flycatchers for good measure. The Gray Silky-Flycatcher and Tufted Flycatchers are amazing! Our final pre-breakfast birds are some Stripe-headed Sparrows in a tree at the edge of the field. Another lifer! After breakfast at the cocina, we pack up and head out for some roadside birding en route to lunch at Quetzalcoatl, a delicious vegetarian buffet restaurant in Tepic. For me, the most amazing part of the day is yet to come. As we drive back toward San Blas, we pull off the road along Camino el Pantanal adjacent to some remnant wetlands. In addition to all the birds in the marshy areas, as we watch in amazement, huge clouds of Yellow-headed Blackbirds form murmurations over and around us. It's like watching a giant black scarf with yellow polka dots wave in the breeze. I've never seen so many Yellow-headed Blackbirds!



DAY 6 | CHACALILLA & SAN BLAS



Today is going to be jam packed with really cool birds in the small community of Chacalilla, a relatively new birding destination near San Blas. After spotting some Elegant Quail running across the road and then obediently hopping up into a tree where we could get a good look, we all tramp across a field to the edge of a marsh. Mark calls a Spotted Rail, and next thing we know, not one, but three appear! And they are close enough to see their beautiful feather patterns, bright red legs and green bills. But wait...there's more. We are about to witness two Spotted Rails mating! Even our very experienced guide has not seen this before. High fives all around before we continue on our way.

A dozen or so species later, we duck around some brush

and line up along the edge of a small meadow, facing the underbrush. Holding our collective breath, we wait as Mark calls for the Lesser Ground-cuckoo. A very difficult bird, but there it is! Photos and high-fives all around for the amazing look at this secretive bird. After a full morning, we stop in San Blas for a bit of local craft shopping and lunch. This afternoon after a siesta during the hottest hours, we head out again for final bit of birding around San Blas before dinner. One of the most delightful things to me is how close the Pygmy-Owls come in. Both Colima and Ferruginous have flown in mere feet from us throughout the trip.



DAY 7 | TECUITATA



Our penultimate day of birding includes some surprises to go with our lifers. After a morning birding Tecuitata Pueblo Road with great looks at Golden and Black-capped Vireos and Rusty-crowned Ground Sparrows among many others, we round a curve to find an amazing al fresco lunch set up for us at a spot overlooking the entire Nayarit coastline. Spectacular! Our afternoon continues with a stop at a local coffee co-op, called Capulin, to sample (and buy) the delicious local blend and a hike to overlook the Cascada El Cora waterfall. I really like the pacing of the Birding by Bus tours. Full days of birding are broken up with some cultural stops and a bit of time for shopping or relaxation.

Appreciation for the areas we visit is built into the trips.



DAY 8 | RUTA HUAYNAMOTA & RIO LA TOVARA

This final morning we head out for some more birding in the hills above San Blas. We are on a hunt for Green Jays, which do finally fly overhead for us. More pygmy owls (so close!) and a number of the usual suspects and we head back to the hotel for lunch and our COVID tests. This afternoon, we are going to finish our week the way we started – on the water. We load up to head out along the Rio La Tovar, stopping first for a quick look at a Rufous-necked Wood-Rail along the shoreline. The ride continues with an astoundingly close look at a Boat-billed Heron rookery! But wait – there’s more. After a visit to the spring providing San Blas with its fresh water supply, the sun begins to set. Our trip back down the river in the deepening darkness rewards us with extraordinary nocturnal views of both Northern Potoos and Common Pauraques. What a way to wrap up a phenomenal week!



DAY 9 | INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Early travel day from San Blas for international flights home from Puerto Vallarta.



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TO VIEW THE FULL BIRD SPECIES LIST FOR THIS TRIP, SEE:

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/44023>

